

## Dracula Has a Mullet by Pondermoniums

**Series:** [Dracula Has a Mullet \[1\]](#)

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**Summary:**

The discovery that Billy Hargrove is a vampire came at a weird time in a weird way. But there were stranger things in Hawkins, unfortunately.

Unfortunately? How fortunate is a vampire? Especially when it's Billy Hargrove.

# 1. Whatever

## Author's Note:

I couldn't think of a better title because I'm doing the irresponsible thing of posting chapter 1 of something I shouldn't be writing in the first place. Basically let's pretend season 3 didn't happen the way that it did. And I like vampires.

This all started after I read [Cherry by LazyBaker](#) too fast. (Not a vampire fic but 10/10.)

The discovery that Billy Hargrove is a vampire came at a weird time in a weird way. It's just not everyday that you walk in on someone fingering Alexandra O'Neil with their teeth—fangs—in her tit.

There were stranger things in Hawkins, unfortunately. Unfortunately? How fortunate is a vampire?

“For fuck’s sake. Really?”

Billy has the grace to extract his freaking teeth with a semblance of being surprised. “I didn’t know you had that kind of mouth, Harrington.”

Steve waves a scolding finger at him with all the gusto of a drunk, and he has the solo cup to justify it. “Put those away! She was homecoming queen last year. Jesus, have some class.”

“You serious?”

Steve downed the last of his beer and Jäger with a grimace, his voice going raspy. “Look, I’m not one to judge a lady’s standards, but really, Alex...Alex?”

The lady in question was so blissed out she looked like one of those unnaturally stupid women in every *Dracula* movie. Billy actually moved aside as Steve pulled her away from the wall—away from Billy—to try and talk to her. Righting her dress with quick yanks, he covered her gorgeous, if small, breasts and gave her a shake. “Alex!

Hey!”

He could hear—could *feel* it, more like—Billy moving behind him in the dark room. Steve had come up here hoping to claim the guest room before someone used it to hookup from the party downstairs. It wouldn’t be the first time he woke up from a mid-party nap to someone being blown, but sometimes it’s the price one pays for free liquor and an ounce of decent sleep.

“What’s wrong with her standards? *Huh, King Steve?*”

The voice is right behind him, so close that the damn vampire has to rear backwards when Steve whirls around. “What kind of vamp name is Billy? Wait, that’s short for something—”

“If you call me by anything else, I’ll hang you from the ceiling by your teeth.”

“You’re not charming like vampires,” Steve practically complained. “Gotta work on that. Everyone gossips here. Folks will know you’re toothy like...” He fumbled a clumsy but sharp snap of his fingers.

Billy made a derisive sound before his voice crooned, “Seems like I’m flying just fine under the vampire radar, then.”

He was heaving Alex back up from where she had slumped against the dresser when Steve released her. Steve raked a hand through his hair, thinking. It was a slog through the alcohol, but he surmised that he could not take her away from this guy. Case being: Steve was far too drunk to logically drive, and to where? It was her house.

“You. You gotta go.”

Billy huffed one of his low, mirthless laughs. Instead of setting Alex nicely on the bed, he just kind of dumped her there. She let out a sort of dumb-giddy moan as she face planted a pillow and he faced Steve. “Excuse me?”

“You’re, like, *biting* people at a party!” Steve realized somewhere between his tone and his slight—or perhaps exaggerated, it was hard to tell at this point—sway, that Billy was far more sober than he felt.

*Not the time to play hero but whatever.*

Billy slowly stepped toward him. "There's plenty worse at this shit house than me, Harrington. Worst weed I've ever had. And that shit whiskey's been so watered down, it's nothing but wheat water."

"Hey!" Steve was poking two fingers at him before he meant to. "They just renovated the place and I got well paid for the tiling and paint!"

"So you're the reason everyone's been tripping over the same spot in the kitchen?" Billy huffed.

"And the whiskey's not so bad if you chase it with grape juice. It's like toast and jam water. Whatever, no one's here for your holier-than-thou, California bullshit!"

Billy was caught by surprise that time. His whole expression lifted, brows and eyes widening as he repeated, "Holier. Than. Thou. That's the kind of shit you pick up from books. I didn't know the king could read."

"Fuck off," Steve grimaced, really just wanting to get Alex tucked into bed and maybe join her. "You've been riding me ever since you got here."

"I definitely have not been doing *that*," Billy retorted and then smiled. "What, you offering?"

"Was *she*?" Steve cornered, drawing himself up to his full height. Admittedly, not much taller than Billy, but small victories lead to great heights or something.

Billy wiped his mouth and Steve's eyes plummeted to those lips. "Yeah, she was. She pulled me upstairs, or is that so hard to believe, blue balls?"

"It kind of is, yeah," Steve said with his hands on his hips. "Alex has asthma. Like, inhaler tucked in her bra at prom in case the slow dance was too much. She'd never get with a chain smoker like you."

"She would if her high school sweetheart cheated on her with the

first college bitch he found.” One of Billy’s eyebrows perked up with his shrug. “I’m a favorite for ladies looking for a rebound.”

Steve grimaced. “Derek cheated? How do you know that?”

“That’s between her and me,” Billy said, stepping forward again. “But I hear you’ve been due for a rebound for a while, Harrington.”

He didn’t want to talk about Nancy. It wasn’t even Nancy, really, but he didn’t want to talk about anything regarding his sex life or lack thereof. Steve diverted, “I want you to leave. Go find someone else to—whatever the hell this is.”

“Well. You’re right here.”

“Not me, dumbass. I told you to leave the house.”

“That’s not gonna happen,” Billy smiled. “What? You’ll let me beat the shit out of you again? We had an audience last time too.”

“I wouldn’t be too cocky about last time,” Steve groaned, beginning to take a step back. “The way I hear it, Jonathan had to mop you off the floor after—”

Billy wasn’t listening. His eyes were on Steve’s neck and the only gut wrenching, instinctive thought Steve had was *weapon*. It came in the form of a glass lamp, which he wrenched out of the wall to break over Billy’s head.

The hard *thud* of thick glass hitting before the shatter and glass raining over the floor had Steve gaping at him. Billy stood very still. Way too still. Steve wondered if he had knocked him out, but his legs hadn’t unbuckled yet.

Then Billy lifted dark eyes beneath his mess of a fringe, pupils blown wide. Steve continued to stare at him with the mechanical parts of the lamp still in his hand. “Holy shit, you didn’t even flinch! You’re supposed to dodge when furniture’s coming at you—”

Billy gripped the wrist holding the parts and wrenched him so far that Steve couldn’t react to Billy’s other hand on his pants. Heaving him up by his belt, he slammed Steve onto the table from which the

lamp had originated. Music thrummed around them, the very beams in the walls vibrating. Steve defied the laws of his denim pants by folding his leg against his side to kick Billy in the gut. Ragged sounds from both of them went unheard by the party below. Steve slid like a heavy tablecloth to the floor with Billy likewise winded and crouched in front of him.

“Why...” Steve tried, rubbing his chest and hoping his talking lasted long enough for him to decide whether running or trying to pin Billy down was the best decision. “...can’t you just...not do this? Whatever alpha bullshit game you think life is.”

“Some of us don’t want to go through life with your dashing prince crap,” Billy spat.

“You think I’m dashing? I couldn’t tell, I passed out the last time you punched me in the face.”

Billy laughed. “Yeah. You’re just as soft as I remember.”

He was moving again and Steve felt a wild, foolish—downright stupid—thrill to try something else. “You need to leave, man. Really. I know a party of blackout graduates might seem like easy pickings, but Hawkins is different.”

“You don’t know shit about different,” Billy growled. “You’ve never seen grass outside this bum fuck of a town.”

“I’ve been to Disney World. And New York City. There’s gotta be some hospital nurse you can swoon into letting you raid their blood bank?”

He couldn’t tell if Billy was getting angrier or not. The man was always angry, seemed like. “I’m not drinking from a freezer. Now shut the hell up. You’ll enjoy this like your homecoming queen.”

A last ditch effort, diving in the direction of the door, but it wasn’t the first time Billy had been on top of him with murder in his eyes. Steve’s hands fumbled at Billy’s face, but then his wrists were pinned above his head and a panicked whine escaped as Billy’s hot, humid breath found him.

Steve went slack. They always do. Billy had figured out that something in his teeth or saliva sedated those he bit, and more. A whole lot more. It made a good flirt into a hell of a time. Alexandra of the Hawkins Homecoming Court had already come on his finger when Steve, of all people, waltzed right in.

It made hunting annoying. It made hunting fun. He had to be picky; didn't want anyone he couldn't look at for longer than three minutes moaning all over him while he tried to feed. His looks did most of the work. The right dash of charm here, a nice compliment there, and then his fangs did the rest.

Steve was hard under him. Billy felt the distinct push of his jeans against his own ass while he slid his fingers under Steve's nape. Lifting his neck, he made sure the moron's windpipe stayed open, as well as lifted his meal closer to his mouth—

A strange sound came from Steve. Billy's eyes flicked to his face, but when that labored breathing sound happened again, he sat up and stared. Steve was crying.

This had never happened before. Those doe eyes that all the girls had ranted about when he first drove into Hawkins were red and squinted as moisture slid over his temples. Billy even checked to make sure he wasn't sitting too heavily on his dick or something, but the gears of his brain slid into place.

Steve usually wore sunglasses at parties. Billy couldn't help but huff a laugh. "Are you a drunk crier, Harrington? Hey, I'm talking to you."

He gripped Steve's jaw, but his whole head lolled, those eyes barely finding him through the daze. "I just wanna sleep," he said quietly. Fresh tears raced into his hair as he passed out.

## 2. Another Day

Steve woke with a start, sitting up in his car with the unpleasant sensation of his face peeling off the steering wheel. He immediately held his head in his hands. It was hard to say which hurt worse: his head or his neck.

Eventually he realized that a static noise was yelling at him. *“Steve! Come in, Steve! It’s Dustin, over.”*

Finding the damn thing involved a great deal of bending and rummaging underneath the passenger seat. “What?” he barked into the receiver.

*“It works! Suzie, it works! Steve, say something. I need to record this so I beat Jeremy. Over.”*

“Jeremy?” Steve grimaced, going back to holding his head.

*“For the golden headset! It’s a weekly competition here at camp. Jeremy’s already won it twice and I only have three more chances to win! Over.”*

“Yeah, okay. Dustin Henderson pours his milk before his cereal and —”

*“No! Not that!”*

“—cries when Vader dies. Is that good?”

*“I might hate you. Over.”*

“Knock ‘em dead, champ. S’good to hear from you.”

*“Say ‘over’ when you’re done! Over.”*

“Good grief,” Steve sighed to himself, and then, “Replace the batteries of whatever science project you made if you wanna talk to me again. Over.”

A pause. *“Shit,”* and then static. Steve’s brows lifted at the goodbye and pushed the antenna back down. Grimacing at the sharp ache in



his neck, he reached over for the notepad in the glove box to make his own note: *Batteries*.

A stroke of thought perked his eyes up at the clock above the radio. "SHIT," he agreed, and stumbled out of the car. He didn't have the time to consider how he had driven home and didn't make it inside. Robin would have his head on a cone for being so late.

Bursting inside, his mother called after him as he rushed up the stairs. "Steve? Steve, what in the world?"

"I'm late, mom!" he yelled as he found the parts and pieces of his stupid uniform.

"The car's been outside all morning! Did you sleep in the car?"

"Mom, I gotta go!"

Stomping back down the stairs with his hands full of blue and white, his sneakers skidded on the floor when he stopped to kiss her cheek. "Mind the floors!"

"Bye!" He dropped the white sailor's hat on the lawn, having to double back for it after chucking the uniform into his car. He craned himself into the backseat to make sure his bag of toiletries was still there. Comb. Deodorant. Check. The vehicle was becoming a miniature apartment at this rate.

\* \* \*

"My god. Look what the cat dragged in."

"Yeah, yeah," he retorted, dumping his backpack with his clothes in a corner of the back room. He didn't dare waste another second taking it to the employees' lockers. Smushing the white hat over his hair, he began washing his hands—

"No, literally. You look like the dead lizard my cat left me on my stoop when I was twelve."

"Robin. Any other day, please."

“Okay,” she relinquished as he joined her behind the glass case. Lowering her elbows on the counter, customers were still slow, allowing her the time to watch him tie his apron and fuss over how his hair should sit or hang in front of his hat. “Have you, by chance, said hello to a mirror, today? You *can* call in sick.”

*What a good idea*, he agreed, but it was too late now. “Another. Day. Robin.”

“Fine,” she relented. Standing back up, she pulled something off her wrist and handed it to him. He frowned at the striped bandana. “At least put this around your neck. You’re gonna scare customers with that rash.”

“Rash? What are you—”

Alex’s party slammed into him.

Robin’s eyes were still on him, waiting for him to take the bandana. “Yeah, thanks,” he clipped, returning to the staff room and then thinking he might put his bag in the lockers after all.

Down the sterile, employees-only corridor, the metal clanged shut as he rushed to the adjoining bathrooms. The hat clapped on the floor as he put his whole head in the sink. Lethargically running his hands over his hair, he pushed the water over his entire scalp and nape despite the growing pain in his neck. Finally easing himself up, he splashed his face before facing the mirror.

“Jesus Christ.”

A bruise still in its raw, red state glowed on his neck like a strawberry from hell. The center of it was a shadow of purple under his hair. No wonder Robin had thought it to be a rash, but with the ghoulish fluorescent light just above the mirror on it, Steve could see the arch of teeth indentions. Two in particular had scabbed over.

He sighed heavily with his eyes on the dispenser of bubblegum pink hand soap. “Shit.”

It burned so bad he pillowed his forehead on the sink’s edge with his forearm. Water, soap, and *red* slid down the drain. When it was over,

the sore was only around the teeth marks. Steve cupped his hands to drink what felt like a gallon of water before he pulled his shirt from his backpack to dry off. Carefully cinching Robin's donation around his neck, he became a magazine-worthy image of a freshly watered sailor boy. Ascot and all.

"Ice cream for breakfast," he tried to cheer himself up, swiping the hat off the floor.

Until his stomach could manage it, though, he settled for nibbling on waffle cones. Robin gave him the once over before she silently volunteered to take the first influx of customers. He was grateful. Less sure he'd ever tell her, though.

Tommy was hard to ignore when he came in, however. "Harrington! What've you got on the menu?"

Robin sent a stoic look to Steve, but he knew a worried *shut-him-the-hell-up-or-get-him-out-of-here* expression when he saw one. They traded positions as he readied the small, sampling spoons—

Straight ahead, Billy was sitting outside of Scoops Ahoy, looking homey on the bench between the frilly tropical fronds. He met Steve's gaze with steady eyes before throwing his arm behind him over the decorative median between the benches, a cocky lift of his mouth moving his attention elsewhere.

"Mm, yeah, that's good," Tommy nodded over his sampling of chocolate praline. "Get me some of that, matey."

He laughed like he expected the whole store to be laughing. "You know, it looks good on you, Harrington. The hat especially."

"I know," Steve replied from inside the glass case. "Thanks for noticing."

Tommy's shit-eating grin faltered. "Why don't you put some sprinkles on it, huh?"

"Sure. That'll be thirty cents extra."

"Thirty cents?" Tommy smiled with that back and forth sway he

thought was a swagger. “You can’t pull out for thirty cents for an old pal?”

Steve placed the cone on the counter with a hand close to the napkin supply. He doubted the cone would leave the store. “You mean when you extorted booze and popularity from me so you could get invited to parties, let alone get laid?”

“And extortion is against company policy,” Robin chimed in. Steve glanced at her, somewhat surprised and impressed that she had stuck around. “One scoop, sugar cone, no sprinkles is a dollar twenty-five, sunshine.”

Tommy planted the bases of his palms on the counter. He certainly wasn’t reaching for the ice cream he wasn’t paying for. “You hiding behind a girl now?”

A crooked grin flashed on Steve’s face. “I’m standing beside her. It’s more than you ever do for the people you lackey behind. Tell your new guy he owes me a pack of band-aids.”

Billy’s head tilted towards them. Unsurprisingly, Tommy threw the ice cream on the floor before storming out. More surprising, after a few minutes of watching Robin and Steve thank an annoyed mother who volunteered to pay for Tommy’s misdemeanor, Billy left in a different direction than Tommy.

“Sorry about him,” Steve said once peace had been restored.

“Please,” she snorted. “As a girl, that’s vanilla sauce when it comes to harassment. Strangely enough, you being the rich pretty boy who all the moms love might make you the most convenient shift partner. So long as you’re not forty-five minutes late again.”

“Yeah, well,” he sighed with the mop in hand. “Don’t let it be known which car is yours. You’ll be lucky if he just keys your car.”

“Well he’s certainly not paying for the eggs to ruin my paint job.”

Steve couldn’t help but laugh at that. He glanced up when she continued, “Shouldn’t you be worried about your parents’ car?”

“Tommy’s stupid, but...” He reevaluated his statement. “We’ll see if he’s that stupid. He’s never stuck around when it came to my dad being pissed, though.”

Robin hummed a sound like she wasn’t surprised. “You gonna tell me why you were late?”

“Nope.” He kept mopping.

“Harrington.”

The mop paused. His hangover reacted to that voice in a bad way. Excitement in the form of nervous turmoil twisted all through his torso like he was readying for another fight. He took his time looking at Billy. Slouching against the mop pole as he was, Steve was shorter today. He chose to pick that battle another day.

“You got a minute?”

He wondered briefly at Billy’s habit of talking quietly. Like he was so used to getting his way that volume wasn’t necessary. Then again, Billy had the reputation for being an all or nothing kind of person.

Steve shook his head, relief sighing through his voice. “No, I was late this morning. All hands on deck, or...yeah.”

Robin snorted, “Your commitment to company bullshit is inspiring.”

Steve opened his mouth to retort but only managed a silent finger in the air. Billy intercepted, “Take a smoke break.”

“I don’t smoke anymore.”

“You work here and you don’t smoke?”

“I don’t smoke because I work here,” Steve threw back. “A place where kids hang out, it isn’t exactly cool to reek like an ashtray.”

Steve had lost his lighter the week he was interviewed. It had gone well, and then Robin congratulated him on being the one applicant who hadn’t come in smelling like cheap tobacco or marijuana. So he let the lighter stay lost.

Suddenly Billy was very close. "Take a minute," he ordered softly. Then he walked out of Scoops Ahoy.

Steve weighed his options. Billy sure wasn't turning around. A large part of Steve wanted to see if Billy might come back to drag him out, but a glance at Robin revealed her rolling her eyes and waving him out.

"Sorry," he said again, leaning the mop against the counter. "I'll pick up one of your shifts! I swear!" he called on his way out.

He dodged the mall crowd to catch up, only to see Billy heading for the exit. "Where the hell do you need this minute to happen?"

Billy answered him by exiting the doors and gripping his uniform until they were huddled behind the bike racks. It was a sunny day in Hawkins, Indiana. Steve knocked Billy's hand off of him. "Aren't you a bag of tricks?"

"You're careless, Harrington."

"Me?" he squawked. "I'm not the one who tried to take a chunk out of me. It's a damn miracle Robin thought this was a rash!" He threw a hand up toward his decorated neck.

"And she's going to keep thinking that's what it is. Do you understand?"

"Or what? You'll make me your blood bag until I die?"

Something like humor and maybe confusion crossed behind Billy's features. Steve didn't dare suspect him of being impressed. "Do you really wanna play that game?"

"I think if you're gonna make it a habit of being close enough to kiss me, you should call me Steve."

An actual *Ha Ha!* genuine laugh came out of the man. Steve expected a punch to follow it. Instead, Billy's head tilted before he pushed Steve against the building while his own stance relaxed. It wasn't exactly a normal conversation distance, but it was something.

“I came to check on you. Then you opened your mouth to Tommy.”

“If you think I’m stupid, Tommy’s dumb as trash. You should be careful. Birds of a feather, after all.”

“That comment’s not helping your case, but Tommy’s going to military school tomorrow. His last shot at you was a weak one.”

“Cool,” Steve remarked with a glance at the parking lot. Billy had achieved the timing of next to no one coming or leaving the Starcourt Mall. “So he’s keying my car as we speak. Great. Are we done here?”

“Well that depends.” Steve’s gaze dropped to Billy’s body moving forward again. “On you.”

Billy’s own eyes dropped to Steve’s hand extending between them, establishing a hand and forearm’s distance. “Hang on. You’ve been here for a year. Why isn’t the town running wild with girls flaunting bites or panicking about them?”

Billy’s weight shifted. Steve’s brows lifted. It wasn’t often that Billy Hargrove looked uncomfortable. “They don’t remember.”

“They what?”

“Are you hard of hearing? I said they don’t fucking remember.” After a weighty pause, he admitted, “You’re the first one who’s remembered.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

[Twitter~](#)

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### 3. Cake

#### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you to everyone who's been giving this story a chance :) it's a guilty pleasure story but it's nice seeing you all enjoy it so far.

Steve drummed sample spoons on the countertop, thinking. A bus had finally arrived with a whole flood of people coming to Starcourt, so Billy left for his own shift at the community pool without saying much else. The glare he'd sent over his shoulder had certainly bestowed the message that they weren't done.

"Gotta say, I thought he was going to hit you."

"Yeah, me too." He glanced at Robin. "Wait, why?"

Her fingers tapped a rhythm on the glass ice cream case. "Isn't he the one who gave you a black eye and split lip back in November?"

Steve's mouth hung open. "How did you know that?"

Her eyes rolled. "Please. Two idiots show up to school looking like they both went through a dryer cycle. Doesn't take a detective."

"I guess you're right," he sighed.

"And a word from the wise: if you're going to fight, be a victim inside the mall."

His frown turned into wide-open bewilderment. "*What?*"

Robin sighed as she took a sampling spoon and treated herself to chocolate raspberry. "I'm not surprised you didn't read any of the paperwork. Lucky for you, Scoops doesn't distinguish harassment between genders. Any shit that goes down on company grounds means the company's got your back. That is, if you don't start the fight. The mall is company grounds."

Steve's body pivoted to fully face her. "The whole mall?"



“Yep.” Her tongue swirled ice cream against the roof of her mouth. “At least, until somebody abuses that privilege. Guess it’s going to be you.”

Steve shook his head. “No thanks, I got the shit kicked out of me enough in high school.”

“Mm!” Robin hummed like *No shit*. “So what did he want?”

*Tap tap tap* went the spoons. “I don’t know.”

Robin’s eyes darted among the tables like the patrons might have an answer. “What did he take you outside for, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jesus. Can’t sling ice cream one minute before an idiot walks in.” He watched her retreat to the back room for her break. Steve pondered with decent consideration what Robin’s reaction would be to...well, to anything. He could barely remember what that kind of ignorance felt like. Even worse, he wasn’t sure if he missed it or not.

He snorted to himself. Robin would definitely laugh in his face and call him a personalized, creative version of moron. At least it was nice having one predictable person around.

\* \* \*

Billy stifled the smirk teasing his mouth as he took his time on the concrete. Ahead, Heather began climbing down from their shared throne. He would have tasted her ages ago if she didn’t work at the pool. The middle-aged women on the right side of fifty, however, conveniently lined the same length of chairs they always did.

“Hope you wear sunscreen, Billy. It’s a hot one.”

“Yes, ma’am, Mrs. Jensen,” he nodded. Like ripples on water, they reacted with varying sighs or greetings as he strolled by. They liked when he said their names. These women were on a schedule, and the starting bell was his shift. He almost hated to disturb it by making them take turns staying home. Almost.

Heather diverted his attention when they came even on the pavement. "The Colton twins are here with their dad again. Keep your whistle close."

He always did. Playing with it like a pendant, he nodded to her and went on his way. A flash of teeth emerged at her well-concealed huff of frustration. Maybe he'd convince her to take some days off and treat her...like he did the Coltons' mom.

As he rotated to land in his seat, that train of thought brought him to an annoying station: Steve Harrington. Billy's bites didn't last two days. Like a tip to his meal, fast healing and memory loss.

Then there was Steve.

Billy had seen the bite from his seat outside the ice cream parlor before Steve left to wash it. It was equally frustrating how both Billy's perks and Jäger bombs had not been enough to keep the idiot from remembering. Part of him was admittedly impressed at the king's tolerance, but he dumped that part right into the pool as he whistled at a kid running with four lollipops in his mouth.

Steve was going to be a problem. At least he seemed smart enough to think next to nobody would investigate if he did say anything...

Billy occupied himself with letting his eyes move over the pool and his thoughts wander elsewhere. Back to Mrs. Colton. There weren't too many variations in blood flavor, unless they were a druggie or only ate fish or something. Mrs. Colton had tasted nice, like blood oranges picked at noon. Hot from the sun. Then again, she had been fresh from tending her roses. But there was something else.

The whistle slid over Billy's bottom lip, his eyelashes falling low behind his aviators. He liked seeing things from their perspective. The memories that came with the blood had been an unexpected experience he'd learned to enjoy. He liked the feeling of his venom dripping through, making limbs simultaneously numb and tingly. The way his face, or the touch of a hand went from being fringed with ticklish lust to glowy bliss.

Mature women were easy in a way his own age group wasn't.

Budding twenty-somethings still starfished on the bed without much contribution unless you caught them at a good time. Older women knew what they wanted, and if they knew how to get it, all the better for him.

He gently pushed Mrs. Colton to a shelf in his mind for a later time. His whistle shrieked over the cacophony of children, bored teens, and tired parents...

*I just wanna sleep.*

There was something funny about that. Billy had not pieced together what, yet.

His gaze slid to Mrs. Wheeler lounging among the line of available prospects. Finding her had certainly been like receiving a cake during an otherwise shit show of a day. The only reason he hadn't picked her up yet was because she was Nancy's and that little prick's mom. Billy wasn't too sure yet if he wanted to risk resurfacing memories of discussing Nancy's first period or finding whatever galactic porn the other one hid in his room. Moms still had mom memories, after all.

Then again...it certainly wasn't a secret the little prude had lost it to The Hair Harrington. Mrs. Wheeler must know, and like any parent who gives a shit, would make sure to keep the guy close. Billy doubted she'd have anything useful that he could use against his latest mistake, but it would be something to distract from the unwanted memories whenever he got around to trying her out.

His eyes flicked up to the tunnel of a hallway that was the community pool's entrance. Cold light reflecting off the concrete floor contrasted the warm day as the hind legs of a brindle dog stuck out from behind a cinderblock column. Billy dropped the whistle onto his chest, sliding the tip of his tongue between his teeth so his lips pursed with annoyance. *A fucking dog. Great.*

Until it got passed the lifeguards' office, it wasn't his problem, but sometimes it felt like his was the only brain working around here. Two *No Dogs* signs framed the entrance, for Christ's sake. There was the quarry for people to take their dogs, yet they still—

Something circled the base of the lifeguard's pedestal. "Heather!"

Her head turned toward him from where she chatted with her visiting friends. "Dog?" he reprimanded, using his whole hand to point down at the grass.

She frowned over her slack jaw before shaking her head. "I don't see a dog."

Second-guessing his peripheral vision, he twisted to see behind the seat, but only a butterfly and a couple of wasps bobbed over the dandelions. Reclining once more, he pinched his nose with a sniff—

The tail end of the dog dashed into the family bathrooms.

Billy's head sagged for a frustrated second before he heaved himself up. Throwing a thumb behind his shoulder, he told Heather to loan him five minutes on his way to the changing rooms. The cinderblock building was a series of caverns smelling like chlorine, sweat, and plastic, but a dog of that size wouldn't have too many places to hide.

His shoulders pivoted to make room for someone who glanced at him on their way out. Billy took note of his prep haircut and striped swimming trunks in case he had to write a citation later.

Shoving shower curtains aside, eventually the whole room was open, but no dogs. Something moved on the edge of Billy's vision, inducing him to rotate.

The room was covered with Christmas lights. Even the ceiling—every single bulb alight. Red, blue, green, yellow, even dangling white ones the stores called 'ice sickles.' Just as Billy tried to remember anything about a scheduled birthday party, his mind clashed with how he had walked in here without noticing them, and why the hell would the decorations be in the bathroom instead of strung up around the pool...

The lights went out.

Billy blinked, and the lights were gone.

## 4. Bittersweet

### Notes for the Chapter:

A bit of a longer one~ Enjoy!

Tommy didn't key his car. He pissed all over the driver's door instead.

After entering through the passenger side and paying for the overpriced carwash, Steve pulled into the grocery store for batteries. He had changed back into last night's party clothes at the risk of smelling like a drunken hoard of college freshmen. He wouldn't be caught dead in that sailor suit outside of work.

"You're apart of the group now," Dustin had said when he personally escorted Steve to buy the damn radio receiver. "Constant communication is key!"

"You'll be at camp for like a month, why do I need this thing?"

"Constant communication, Steve! Those idiots could get themselves stuck in who-knows-where without me! Look, you're not much, but you've got adult liberties, which more than makes up for me not being here."

Steve had no idea what the hell Dustin thought he was offering, but Mike, Will, Lucas, and Max hadn't reached out to him or vice versa. The closest they came was when Eleven had accidentally gotten a hold of him instead of Mike. After listening to her call out to him for ten minutes, take a break for five, and then recommence, he'd replied, "Sorry kid, it's Steve. Mike's probably gotten roped into something with his parents. Try the house phone."

"Oh," she'd mumbled. "Thanks. Sorry."

"No problem." And that had been that. Not to say they didn't ever come into Scoops. It was worth it to see Robin's reaction to the five of them crash landing into the ice cream parlor. After an occasion where Robin broke the news that cones—especially waffle—cost

more than cups, and toppings cost extra, Steve made sure to roll Eleven's chosen flavor in the waffle cone crumbs whenever she came in.

"I...I can't pay," she'd all but whispered after frowning at him setting the waffle cone in one of the metal ring holders.

"You like waffles, right?" Still confused, she nodded. "Then don't worry about it. Just pay for a normal cup."

She'd grown up in a lab and had Hopper for a dad, for crying out loud. Let the kid have her toppings. With her power, he'd have scooped his own ice cream while the workers' backs were turned. He was still waiting for Robin to ask why he let the one kid get anything free when the others spoke to him with much more familiarity.

For now, he pried the batteries off their hook and made his way to the cash register. Stopping in his tracks, he doubled back to peruse the first aid aisle of the pharmacy. Hands now full of batteries, variety sized band-aids, disinfectant gel, gauze, gauze clamps, and cotton pads, he rerouted to the checkout lanes.

A whole flower display blocked his way, the chill of the flower refrigerators negatively reminding him of the workplace he just left—

"The tulips are out of season! No wonder they're sellin' like hotcakes."

Steve paused to eye the pair of women chatting over the display. He recognized the roses and daisies, but hadn't known the name of the new ones. "Tulips, huh?"

The woman speaking turned to him. "Mr. Harrington. How are your folks?"

"Great," he answered mechanically. His fingertips dusted the tops of closed, violet tulips. The last purple ones. "Just great. Were you looking at these?"

"Purple! What an interesting choice. Actually, I—"

"Yeah, my mom would love these."

Her expression pivoted as she absorbed that. “For your mom! What a sweet boy. Go ahead, be sure to put them in water when you’re home.”

“Yeah, sure thing. Thanks,” he flashed a smile and added the loud plastic-wrapped bundle to his load.

“You look nice today,” said the other woman, one of the elementary school teachers. “Like something from old Hollywood with that ascot.”

Steve laughed. “Thanks, Miss Hendrix. Have a good one.”

“You too, dear.”

Dumping the lot of it onto the conveyer belt, he realized he had to give Robin the bandana back eventually—sans bloodstains. With his eyes on the bouquet as he opened his wallet, Steve congratulated himself on the unconscious foresight of buying his mom flowers.

\* \* \*

The Harrington house had four bedrooms. The square footage and pool made guests Oooh and Ahh over the place but Steve considered only two rooms worth anything. His own, and his mom’s second bedroom. Officially, his parents slept in the same room, but they both had their own offices. His mother’s had what she called the “daybed,” for her migraines. Steve knew a twin-sized bed when he saw one. He’d always been allowed in his mother’s personal room, never his father’s.

Not that he minded. Much like Mrs. Harrington, he used the room for when he didn’t want anyone to bother him. The unwritten rule of the house: do not disturb the offices.

Using kitchen shears, he clipped off the ends of the tulips. He had no idea what that did, but his mom always cut the flowers when she bought bouquets for the room. After making a thorough mess of the granite countertops with plant debris and plastic, he shoved the lot of them into the largest mason jar he could find since he knew she would be pissed if he used the crystal vases.

Somewhere through the years, Mrs. Harrington had stopped scolding him for coming into her room. Maybe it was the year his dad stopped buying her flowers. Steve didn't like that. His mom clearly likes flowers—rare as it is to not see a bouquet in her office—and it became a sort of vengeance to be the one to keep the flowers coming, especially with his dad's credit card.

*Old man can't be bothered to pick up a rose when he buys his cognac and scotch.*

He opened the door to an empty room. The skylight gave it a nice glow. The white carpet and soft green painted walls made a nice change from the rest of the house. Leaving his shoes outside, he waved water off of a hand while setting the jar on the designated tile mat; a large coaster for his messy flowers.

Glancing behind him, he moved the low, oval coffee table back to its foot impressions in the middle of the room, but stopped when he kicked a large, open book. He recognized it as one she had brought back from New York City years ago. Steve picked it up to make sure none of the pages were bent and read the cover—at least he tried.

"Ahimsa Vinyasana," he pronounced completely incorrectly. Flipping through it, the English was legible enough, but he began to wonder if his mom had gotten it for the pictures of men instead. Full pages and whole spreads had been devoted to black and white photographs of nearly naked men in bendy poses, flexing poses, upside-down...

"Either this is an exercise book, or mom's got weird taste in porn," he said to nobody. Sitting down at the table, he perused the pages until he decided to return the table to the wall. Using the space, he sat upright with the book open to a typical crisscross leg pretzel, but with the legs crossed above instead of underneath.

"Lotus pose?" he read, but his jeans were not pleased with the arrangement. He was due for a shower anyway.

"Hi, mom," he greeted an hour later, back on the same floor in shorts and a t-shirt. Legs spread wide, he'd given up on the stretches, but it was still nice to look.



“What brings you in here?” she asked, hanging her purse and a larger, portfolio bag on their wooden pegs. Her attention snapped to the tulips. “Did you get me flowers?”

Steve blew a halfhearted laugh. “Mom, who do you think’s been putting flowers in here?”

“I know, but you always bring me daisies.”

Daisies were cheap. “Yeah, well, uh. You know, I’m working now. And they seemed to be going fast at the store. Do you like ‘em?”

She distractedly brushed her fringe out of the way. “Sure, honey. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen tulips, but I’m not feeling well. I’ve been fighting a migraine all day but it’s here regardless—”

“Then lie down,” he began to stand up to get the stair ladder.

“Steve, why don’t you go back to your room?”

“Mom, I’ll be quiet. I always am.” He slid the shudder over the skylight closed. As he stepped down, he heard her heave a breath and scrape a match for a candle. She said lavender helped her migraines. He thought weed would do better, but he kept it to himself.

“You need to clean up the mess in the kitchen.”

He was one knee down to sitting back on the floor, but finally taking the message, he took his book and left. He closed the door softly but let the book slap the counter as he swept plant stems and leaves over the counter to fall in the bin. After shoving the plastic into it, he used a dishtowel to dry everything and removed himself to his room.

He sat on his bed only to stand right back up. He opened the bedside drawer for his Walkman. The adjoining bathroom light switched on, a couple of towels got thrown into the tub, and he sat. It wasn’t the most comfortable, it was damp, and the yellow lighting sucked, but it was his.

Drowning his brain with music, he stretched his feet by the tub faucet.

*Waiting. For what, Steve didn't know. That kept being the problem. Humans were supposed to be superior, or some shit, but he could definitely hear his own heartbeat marking the seconds as they waited for the damn door to move, the yo-yo to flinch, the lights to go on.*

*The fire to start. But Steve couldn't find his lighter. In this cold fucking place, it was the best thing, and he couldn't find his damn lighter—*

Steve startled awake, jumping so much the back of his head thwacked the tub.

*DinggggDongggg.*

He scrubbed his hands over his face, knocking the headset out of his ears as the doorbell only rang faster. *Dingdong dingdong dingdongdingdongdingdong.*

"What asshole...?" he rushed, stumbling out of his room and racing to get the door before his mom woke up. The door swung open to reveal: Billy.

"*What?*" Steve barked.

Billy's brows lifted. "Wanna try that again?"

Turns out, he did. Steve's eyes moved over his shoulders at the street, but Billy seemed alone. "How do you know where I live?"

"Everyone knows where you live," Billy answered. Enunciation on the *everyone*.

"Doesn't mean I invited you."

"And yet, here I am. You gonna let me in or we gonna do this on the stoop?"

"Do wha—" he began but his own name turned both of their attentions inside the house.

"Steve? Who's at the door?"

Billy smirked gently at Steve's jaw ticking as he stepped into the house. Billy could smell the shower he'd recently taken as he barely moved to let Billy inside. His eyes lifted to the woman coming down the stairs—Steve definitely took after his mother. She was no Mrs. Wheeler, but she had the same angular bone structure, low eyebrows and dark, full head of hair as her son. Hers seemed longer than most women; bedhead ringlets all the way down her back. "Mrs. Harrington. Good evening, I'm Billy. Billy Hargrove."

He could see Steve's head turn in his periphery, but ignored him in favor of shaking Mrs. Harrington's hand. His other came around to sandwich hers when he noticed her eyes were swollen. "Did I come at a bad time?"

Steve intervened, "She gets headaches. Mom, you can go back to bed. I'm sorry I didn't get the door fast enough."

His gaze landed on his mother's hand still in Billy's. Like a twitch, he scratched his nose, eyes darting between them.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Billy purred. "I've got an impatient streak. If I'd known, I wouldn't have disturbed your beauty rest."

Mrs. Harrington laughed. "I haven't had beauty sleep in years."

"I wouldn't say that," Billy smiled.

"OKAY," Steve all but yelled. Both of them turned to look at him as he declared, "Billy's just here to talk about Alex's party. We had to do some swapping around of cars to make sure everyone got home. Some keys got mixed up."

His mother's head tilted toward him. "*You* were a designated driver?"

"Yeah," he lied, holding his hips to stand his ground. "What?"

Mrs. Harrington looked dubious. Billy looked like he'd heard a thousand better lies just this morning. He let the former's hand slide out of his to say, "I won't be long, and I'll make sure we're quiet. I hope you feel better, Mrs. Harrington."

"Thank you, Billy," her voice trailed behind them as Billy sauntered

behind Steve to the backyard.

“Nice knees,” he sassed the moment the sliding door closed.

“My second-best feature,” Steve slapped right back. “What the hell was that?”

Billy took his time answering, extracting a box of cigarettes from his rear jeans pocket. “Moms like me. What? They don’t like you?”

“Oh, they like me, but I think for very different reasons.”

Billy’s tongue slid over his bottom lip as he laughed. “Are you cock-blocking me, Harrington?”

“You know, when you said there were more fish in the sea, I didn’t think you meant the shallow marriage pool.”

“What can I say? Teenagers bore me. You can’t tell me your tired old man would give two shits about his pent up wife, unless the family name was at stake.”

Steve peeked up at the house to make sure the right blinds were closed. “I don’t care what he thinks.”

“Oh yeah? And what about your sweet mom? It’s pretty common, having a hot young wife in this town. The husbands are grey, but all the pretty birds are tied down. I’m providing a service, really.”

“It’s called hair dye.”

Billy laughed. “Not between their legs.”

“Okay,” he repeated, looking elsewhere. “I never needed that. Seriously, do I need to worry about you trailing after my mom, now?”

“I don’t trail after anybody, King Bitch. I just look at ‘em and they come for me. But now I’m curious. What would you do if you saw me walking out of your mom’s bedroom, huh?”

The time it took him to withdraw his lighter was how long Steve took

to unwillingly say in the flame's light, "That's completely fucked, but it'd be her choice. If you bit her, though, I wouldn't stand by."

*Ku-shook*, the lighter closed. Just the ember of Billy's long inhalation and the blue marbling from the pool illuminated their faces. "Really? And you'd do...what?"

Billy certainly didn't sound convinced of Steve's bravado, but he doesn't care. Plucking the cigarette out of his hand before he can stop him, Steve takes a drag while strolling between the pool chairs. The nicotine slams into his brain like an old friend. It's bittersweet. "Use your imagination."

"Now see, that's the wrong answer."

Steve turned around, mid-drag. "Or what? You'll shove me against a wall and spit in my face? Break a plate on my nose again? Screw my mom just to prove that you're an easy slut?"

"All good ideas," he said while taking his cigarette back. He threw it into the pool. Steve's reaction satisfied him. "But I liked your first suggestion today."

He watched Steve's eyes wander his face, trying to remember. "You don't...You're not biting me again."

"Why not?"

"You can't be serious."

"I've been thinking," Billy announced with a sniff. He withdrew another cigarette to tuck behind his ear. "And it seems to me, that having someone know about my...condition, could work in my favor."

The huff that burst out of Steve bubbled into laughter. "You're crazy."

"Oh, believe me, I'm not happy it's you, either."

"No, you're insane. Fucking insane. Coming from me, man, *not* a compliment. My neck was *infected* this morning!"

“Not my problem.”

“It sure as shit is your problem! You pollute the blood bag, you pollute the supply—not saying I’m agreeing—”

“You been having trouble sleeping?”

Steve froze before easing a step back. “How’d you know that?”

“You cried like a baby about it before passing out.” A cocky smile flashed on Billy’s face. “But I could guess from those bags your dull eyes are carrying. You’ve lost your touch, Harrington. I can give it back.”

Steve unconsciously raised a hand to his hair, therein realizing the bedhead state it had been in all this time. “Yeah, right. By draining me dry? Try again.”

“I told you that they usually don’t remember,” Billy hushed. “They heal fast too.”

“Except I do remember, and I woke up to Satan’s asshole on my neck.”

“It’s fine now, though, right?”

Steve shook his head at the ground and continued his lap around the pool. “No, no. You’re not hearing me. We’re not doing this.”

“Oh yeah? How’d you sleep?”

Steve sent a fake laugh over his shoulder only to find Billy on his heels. Rotating, he continued walking backwards. “You mean when you left me in my car against my favorite pillow?”

“You’re welcome.”

“Pft, thanks,” he grumbled. “Still wouldn’t call it a great sleep.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Something’s lightened up in you since you took a neck-full of sleep

juice, but you're still a grade-A prick, you know that?"

Billy caught Steve's shirt to maneuver them towards the gate and out of view of the house. "Here's how it's gonna work."

Steve's bare feet stuck on something in the grass, and then his back was against the rough fence. "You're gonna let me drink whenever I want, and you'll sleep nice and tight for it."

Steve smirked. "Ran out of classmates and moms?"

Billy's eyes slid to the side as his lips lifted on one side. "I've got my eye on someone."

"Yeah? Librarian?"

Those eyes slid back to him, not amused. Steve had the sudden awareness that the back of his head had very little clearance with the fence as Billy whispered, "I don't know her job. I know she made your ex."

Steve's lips parted as he went through that list and then the light bulb visibly went off above his head. "Wheel—*Wheeler*? Mrs. Wheeler? You're joking. You've gotta be—Jesus Christ...I'll never be able to look her in the eye again..."

Billy chuckled with a hand rising to check that the cigarette was secure behind his ear. "Nice bandana, by the way."

"No! NO—"

Billy shoved the fabric so far up that he held Steve's jaw while he bit the other side of his neck. Steve's hands flew to his arms, but his fight quickly relaxed. Slumping against the fence, Billy's other hand slid around his ribcage to keep Steve in place while he took his time. The artery pulsed against his lips, blood rushing into his mouth when he withdrew his teeth. A thigh moved between Steve's legs, giving him a spot to sit as Billy indulged.

When he pulled off with a loud and wet, sucking sound, red slipped down Steve's neck. Billy gave it a long lick for dessert.

“Look alive. You’re walking yourself inside.” He wagged Steve’s head from side to side until a semblance of clarity filled those eyes. And when it did, Steve frowned before looking right down at the erection straining his shorts. Billy hummed a sound of mirth and removed his leg. Steve stumbled to stand up and cover his groin at the same time.

“That’s part of the deal too. Tell your mom to come by the community pool some time.”

Steve could only blink dumbly as Billy let himself out through the gate.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Between 1984-86 was when the US made drinking age go from 18 to 21, so Steve's mom isn't scolding him for partying.



## 5. Problems

### Notes for the Chapter:

May the Fourth be with you. Happy Cinco de Mayo.  
Wash your damn hands <3

It was rare that Billy got enough blood to last him a few days. Not that he preferred eating or drinking. He didn't have to shit or piss with blood, and the overall experience left food in the dirt.

Nevertheless, he now had the chance to use his days off for something other than hunting. Going to the thrift shop just outside of town wasn't the most ideal, but he could use some new shirts. Old Faithful, his crimson button-up, had officially said farewell to its last button. He didn't need them, but this dull place experienced *winters*, and the wind crawled up whatever garments lacked enclosures. The consignment shop on Main Street only catered to worn out prom dresses, and he'd rather vomit in public than go in there. He would never ask Susan to repair anything.

Bad radio pop sang from busted speakers above his head. The whole store hung from wall to wall with sixties and seventies band shirts, posters, and wall tapestries. No one had bothered to wash the marijuana out of them so the place was a cross between ancient grandma and stoner den. Billy peeked up at some one-hit-wonder's poster of a naked woman with the band's name across her body keeping it from being outright smut.

*It'd be her choice. If you bit her, though, I wouldn't stand by.*

A short puff of air blew out of his nose as he chuckled over the rack. Hangers scraped over the pole as he resumed his perusing, stirring that around in his mind for a long time. Did the idiot know he'd basically said Billy could fuck his mom? Strange priorities, but he couldn't say he'd ever gotten someone's blessing before.

Billy's mind wandered away from that moment, his brain meditating in the seconds he'd stood in the foyer. Houses often had feelings—auras, much as he despised that word, it was the only one that fit—

just like people did. He knew Steve had been mostly alone, like when a hand hovers over a stove; Billy knew where the hot spots were. He could look at a house and feel how many people were inside it. He could look at a person and gauge their mood—their vulnerability. And if he had tasted them, they were as legible as a movie screen.

Depending on the person. Steve was not unique, there, at least. Then again, Steve was not exactly an overflowing bucket of ideas. Some people clung to Billy's senses like bad cologne. If anything, Steve might have been a lucky choice in refreshment...

The house stood oddly empty, though. Most solo-children were so wrapped up in themselves that their blood made up for twelve people's ideas flooding Billy's brain. Steve had certainly given the impression of trust-fund, preppy brat, but with unique clarity, Billy felt how the house was not Steve's castle. Steve considered it his mother's.

*How fucking considerate.* He stepped out of the memory—

“...free buzz. You don't even need to buy jeans for this amount of second-hand.”

Billy's eyes flicked up to the familiar voice, ready to ignore the pair strolling close to his rack, until he recognized the freckled face of Steve's coworker.

*Robin.*

The moment Steve's memory provided the name, her eyes found his. She was good at being stoic, but so was he. Mutual dislike bounced off each other as they turned in separate directions.

Then, as Billy strolled his way to the denim selection, he realized: a full-time gig in one room with one person...the person Steve was most likely to squeal to was right here. Some kind of wildly stupid luck had made her hand over a bandana instead of an interrogation. Billy couldn't be confident in Harrington's ability to deflect their newfound familiarity with one another.

How likely were two people in town to have a bad reaction to his

bite? Steve was one in a million, surely, compared to all he'd savored between here, California, and the long damn drive in between. Steve might remember him, but Robin sure as hell wouldn't.

Billy peeked behind him at the pair rummaging through all the pre-decade, tasseled jackets. Deciding on a test run, he walked directly behind Robin.

“ ‘Scuse me.”

Like a streetlight sparking to life, her friend woke right up, wide eyes on him. Robin, however, exhaled a measured breath and stepped into the clothes to let him pass.

One of his brows lifted as he lingered an extra millisecond behind her, inhaling the smell of her conditioner and reading the vibe that actively pulled away from him.

“Hm.”

She pivoted with sharp eyes on him. “What?”

Billy almost ignored her, but something was different about Robin. She wouldn't be the first girl who didn't somersault herself at him, but even people who didn't take a shine to him still stood close to him, kept stealing glances at him, found themselves repositioning to be closer. Her friend on the other side of the rack was practically bouncing to trade places with her. He held a certain magnetism that made knowing who would be easy, easier. Robin seemed...immune.

Billy was getting real tired of surprises.

“You work at Scoops, right?”

“Considering you looked me dead in the face there, yeah.”

Billy's open mouth stayed open. He definitely had to bite her now. This bitch was way too smart for Steve.

“Does Harrington always show up late? That's gotta be inconsiderate.”

She rotated to fully face him and crossed her arms. “Maybe, but he makes up for it. I’m not going to talk shit about somebody behind their back, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

Billy smirked, “You’re saying he’s reliable. You can talk about that, then, because I find it a little hard to believe. Hi,” he crooned to the friend uselessly staring.

“Uh, hi.”

*Look the fuck away*, Billy growled inwardly. Her chin ducked down and she clumsily went to look at clothes elsewhere. Robin watched her go, her pursed lips relaxing in abandoned wonder. Her hair whirled around her face when she looked back at Billy resting his arm on the rack.

“Why are you asking about Steve?”

Billy’s eyes roamed lazily around them, making sure what few people stood in the store had other things to look at. Robin’s selection conveniently rested in the back of the store, overshadowed by a square column and a piñata as large as Billy hanging from the ceiling.

Maybe Steve’s lie about mixing up keys would go a little further. “Well, I was at Alex’s party, and might’ve had a hand in Steve’s oversleeping—”

Robin’s features changed a split second before she snorted. “Okay.”

Billy paused. “What?”

Robin inhaled through her nose while she shrugged, nodding. “Okay. That’s all.”

Billy’s brows twitched downward and then he blurted, “Wait, wait, no. Wrong idea—”

“I really don’t care,” she insisted, reaching for the hangers.

This got out of hand way too quickly. Billy pushed his knee into the back of hers, buckling her leg and pulling her the rest of the way down while he tugged her shirt collar aside. Biting into the curve of

her neck, Billy let his teeth linger a little extra long inside before he tasted blood. Since he hadn't struck a vein, he didn't get much, and he felt his venom puckering the holes closed against his tongue already.

Adjusting her shirt and setting her back on her feet, keeping her upright was like balancing cards together. Billy nestled her in the crammed rack, and waited a couple of minutes until she started to look like she was waking up.

On his way out of the store, he heard the friend giggle, "Wow, you've never smoked before, have you?"

\* \* \*

Steve held his face with his elbows planted on the ice cream case.

Billy was a problem. A big, blond, pushy—literal pain in the neck sort of problem, and Robin wasn't helping.

*"When I said I'd cover one of your shifts, I didn't mean the next day,"* he'd complained over the phone.

*"I'm sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of my blender making a margarita."*

Steve knew it was a breakfast smoothie by how often Robin came into work with them, but it was still a pain in the ass. Waking up for work after having the most raging hard-on in his life was one thing; the fact that it was caused by *Billy Hargrove* was another. Then there was the sleep itself.

The sleep was *great*. Instant REM sleep. No dreams. No tentacles. No monster dandruff floating in the air. No keeping track of kids way too reckless and young for this shit. Just sleep.

Steve rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. There's no way in hell he could admit this to Billy. That smug prick didn't need the esteem boost. Steve supposed it some sort of accidental godsend that Billy didn't make fun of his boner. Recalling Alex, though, if being inebriated on whatever vampire bullshit Billy used also made someone horny as fuck, then he and Alex were two for two. That was some consolation,

at least.

*Or maybe I'm still paying for calling Jonathan a queer.*

Steve deserved it. Having his face and reputation beaten to a pulp—twice—losing Nancy, and buying the guy a new camera seemed retribution enough, but he agreed that he deserved it. He'd never actually cared one way or another about homosexuals. He'd only said it because he was angry, heartbroken, and Tommy had been full of ideas on action instead of passively stewing in it. Steve would be a liar if he said he'd never kissed a boy anyways.

"Hm," the corners of his mouth turned down, pondering. It had been a long time since he'd thought about kissing boys on playgrounds. That had been when everyone in Hawkins was too young to remember and all it took was his father's disappointment to make Steve turn the other way. The kid had moved out of town anyways.

Did Billy like guys?

The thought would've made Steve laugh if it weren't so difficult to imagine Billy Hargrove with girls, let alone boys. Billy was *a lot*. Steve could admit the guy was attractive, but it became hard to see once he opened his mouth. Girls definitely looked his way, but they all seemed to keep some distance, like how you'd regard a lion.

Steve did chuckle at that, while rubbing his thumb over his bottom lip. He couldn't recall Billy ever prioritizing girls at parties before Alex. He always seemed too busy being flashy and making everyone forget Steve ever existed.

"Can I get the strawberry float, please?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure." Steve snapped out of it, lifting his scooper for the root beer and strawberry flavors. Stacking them in a cone and sticking a waffle straw into it for garnish, he rang the person up and went back to brooding—

"Are you okay?"

He peeked up from the basin of warm water in which they washed their scoopers. "What?"

“Your neck,” said the middle schooler with glasses as thick as Barbara’s—

Steve felt sick as she gestured to her own neck. He touched the gauze underneath Robin’s bandana. Turns out, cold water and soap worked just fine in removing fresh bloodstains. “Oh, yeah. I just got a, uh, rash. It’s nothing contagious, just doesn’t look pretty.”

The kid nodded like she understood. “I have eczema.”

Steve blinked, searching for anything obviously different about her. “What’s that?”

“It’s when my skin gets red and itchy. Some of my friends like to poke it. Others make fun of me. It’s not contagious, but they act like it is.”

“Oh,” he considered, shifting his weight. “Well, kids can be real stupid. There’s nothin’ wrong with being a little different, okay?”

She blinked up at him, just taking the time to absorb his words. “Thanks. What’s your name?”

“Uh...Steve. It’s Steve.”

“Thanks, Steve,” she held her hand out over the counter.

He laughed, giving it a shake. “Sure, kid. Do you want another waffle straw? We got some with chocolate on the inside. We don’t tell anybody, ‘cause we get to eat ‘em if they don’t sell out in time. They go stale. You didn’t hear that from me, got it?”

Her gasp widened into a toothy grin as he passed her a prized waffle straw with a napkin for a handle. “Thanks, Steve!” and she dropped a loud handful of coins into the tip jar.

An easy smile lingered on his face as she skipped out of the shop—

“That was really sweet of you.”

Steve’s attention jerked to the woman he hadn’t noticed waiting further along the counter. “Miss Hendrix, hey. What can I get you?”

“What do you recommend? What’s your favorite thing here?”

“Oh, well, it’s not on the menu,” he declared with a poised hand on the counter. She smiled a little wider. “But I like to mix the blueberry and blackberry together. The GAP’s staff room has a toaster oven. Put some graham crackers in there, or microwave some raspberry sauce to go over it.”

He nodded enthusiastically, to which she laughed, “Yes, please. I don’t mind the crackers or sauce at room temp, but I’ll have one of those straws too.”

“Sure thing.” Steve smiled with his eyes on the napkin tin. Handing her the straw first, she nibbled on it while saying, “You’re good with kids. Have you ever considered being a teacher?”

Steve thought laughing in her face would err on the side of rude, so he said, “Uh...thanks, but you wouldn’t be asking me that if you’d had me in your class.”

She hummed a sound of acknowledgment. “I suppose you were already closer to middle school when I started kindergarten teaching.”

“My kindergarten teacher told my mom that my halo only glowed during nap time, and my horns kept it on straight,” he said from inside the case.

He’d caught her off guard with that one. Steve let himself smirk as she laughed and he opened the cracker box. “Not much for long periods of sitting, are you?”

“Not a bit, nope. And I’m pretty sure my high school teachers wouldn’t have kinder things to say. Can’t say I put much effort into changing their minds.”

“That’s good, though. You know how the other half of the class feels. Too many teachers were good students, and a good student does not equate to a good teacher. Therefore...bad students don’t necessarily make poor teachers.”

Raspberry sauce drizzled the scoops, shards of graham crackers stuck



out of the blue, red, and purple medley, and Steve finished it off with a cherry. “It’s nice of you to say, but you need certifications to be a teacher, and I couldn’t get into Tech. So...four eighty-five, please.”

She took her time setting her purse on the counter, her eyes heavily on him until she handed him a five and stuck another bill in the tip jar. “Then may I ask, why did you give that little girl a free straw?”

Steve inhaled deeply and let it out in a huff as he handed her fifteen cents. “I don’t know. It’s summer. Summer isn’t the time for problems.”

She smiled softly. “Then give yourself time, Steve. It’s your summer too.”

He tried to smile back, but only managed pressing his lips together. After watching her go, he slouched on one foot as his head lowered, surveying the counter—

Miss Hendrix tipped twenty dollars. Steve stared at the jar for a while, then decided that maybe Robin’s solo shifts weren’t so bad.

## 6. Noise

The smell of pancakes and bacon linger in the air from the family's breakfast. Max had since run off with her friends while the major adults in the house left for work. Billy had the pleasure of sleeping in and ignoring the fact that he had to be at work in twenty minutes. The perks of swimming trunks being the uniform.

So he lay in bed with his boom box playing soft, radio jazz. He'd bumped it the night before, but he didn't mind the change of pace for once. When you have to listen to screaming children all afternoon, a piano isn't an unwanted alternative. When you have to have people in your head and ears so much, anything else was relaxing. As convenient as it may be to have people nearly ready to drop on their knees for him, even Billy still found them exhausting. So while he had the time to choose the company he kept, he meditated on his newfound memories.

Billy learned things about people you ordinarily wouldn't. For instance, Robin swung for the fences of an all-girls team. That explained a lot. Her reaction to him had not only been lackluster, but her entire attention span for men certainly greyed out in her recollections.

And Steve had a surprisingly good memory. Like, really good. The guy had next to no deductive reasoning, but he remembered how to spell supercalifragilisticexpialidocious after it was written one time on some fourth grade chalkboard. It's probably the only thing that got him through high school. If he managed to pay attention long enough, whatever he picked up in class got him through the exams. It would also explain his ability to work at Scoops Ahoy, where the primary skill was memorizing a menu and ever-changing seasonal flavors and sundaes.

Billy knew this because of Robin. She liked talking to Steve. She was living in a state of confused surprise that she liked talking to Steve. If memories were a timeline, Steve was on her roll of film cells that went from black and white, to grey tones, and now Billy could see the exact spots where color infused her opinion of him.

A particularly fond memory, if the glowy nature of it was any indication, is when Steve had randomly asked during a slow hour at work, *“Why is it called a condominium? You know, condom? Like, really? Who thought of that?”*

Robin had stared bluntly at those big, genuinely curious eyes and snorted, *“You know what, you got me.”*

Frequent spots of color were when Steve sang at work. The mop handle may as well have been his microphone. *“You know the entire mall’s closing staff can hear you, right?”*

But he somehow succeeded in getting the whole GAP’s staff singing Bowie’s “Modern Love,” and his rendition of Prince’s “Raspberry Beret” was decent enough to not warrant the mop bucket getting dumped on his head.

Billy knew Robin was worried about Steve. Her brain was stockpiled with memories of Steve in all his full king glory at Hawkins High—and that ridiculous pompadour, good god...

But Steve had changed after Nancy. He’d certainly changed after getting with her—the hoity toity, prude brainiac of all people. Robin had been admittedly impressed how, though Steve’s comments in class gave the impression of an abysmal IQ, his taste in people had gone up. He dropped that asshead, Tommy, like a hot rock, and it seemed to only make his popularity go up until some asshole with a mullet drove into town.

Billy smirked.

Everyone had heard about the fight with Jonathan. Hell, the residential pariah had *won and* been arrested. Robin thought Byers was nice—too nice for Hawkins—but she’d been just as shocked by the fight as anybody else. Perhaps the most surprising thing had been the change in both Jonathan and Steve. Jonathan stopped slouching. He talked more, whereas Steve stopped running his mouth about useless things, for the most part. Stopped using so much hairspray and ironing his clothes. Something relaxed in Steve—in both of them.

But Steve deflated after the breakup, hair and all. Robin was pretty

certain he only kept his attendance record up by showing up high. She couldn't say when he'd last gotten a haircut.

She thought it odd yet somehow endearing that Steve's chosen crowd had gone from hairspray bimbos to the next generation nerd squad. The contrast between them and Steve only amplified all of their dichotomous qualities. The great *Star Wars* debate that had gone down in Scoops during his first week of working there had been a marvel to behold, if nothing else than for Steve's ability to actually participate.

*"There's no way you watched those movies for anything other than Carrie Fisher,"* she accused. Not like Robin could argue against that.

*"Look, show up for the bikini, stay for the light saber fights,"* Steve had defended without shame. *"And there's something really cool about the son defeating the father, you know? Being better than that asshole's decisions."*

Robin had been very impressed by that. Like, her vision narrowed in on Steve's face, counted his tiny moles, and fixed his hair for him. Then Steve said, *"Although, the planet canon getting blown up is one of the best parts."*

*"You mean the Death Star?"* the pale Wheeler with a beak of a nose corrected.

*"Yeah, that,"* Steve nodded.

Robin had grimaced somewhat. *"Isn't the whole point of the first movie to destroy that thing? How do you not know what it's called?"*

Steve's eyes wandered vacantly before he shrugged, *"Selective memory, I guess."*

*Weirdly selective,* Robin agreed, and frankly, so did Billy.

Because there was a distinct *lack* of Billy in his brain.

That...bothered him. The man discovers vampires exist and doesn't fixate on that at all?

Billy feels him, like a ghost in his veins, and leans in his direction. It's stronger than Robin's, having fed on him twice, and the homecoming queen was already fading. The easiest tactic was to find himself in the person's thoughts, and go from there.

But what he found...was background noise.

Billy Hargrove was background noise.

*What the hell?* He looked around, waiting for the bright memories to show up. They usually sprang right forward. People liked revisiting certain memories—they liked reliving the bad ones too, but not even his and Steve's fight at the Byers' perked up. How many times had they played basketball? Attended the same parties? Showered together, for Christ's sake, and Billy had never been a focal point at all?

He sought his first day at Hawkins High, because he remembered it pretty damn well himself, what with how unimpressed the whole experience had been. Figured he'd make his name known up front to justify everyone's unconscious interest, and the amount of energy coiled in this town was hard to miss. Everyone was so pent up, Billy knew the guys would scream if their girlfriends so much as peeked at him too many times. Or the other way around.

Those types were easy to conquer, though. He was good at basketball, had his own car, and all he had to do was beat a certain record on the keg? Done. He was in, and he was king.

*He's a little intense, huh?*

Billy rotated, finding Steve's voice and locking onto the moment in gym when Billy was assigned to go one on one with somebody and Steve sat in the bleachers. Since Billy was new, he didn't have a gym uniform yet, so he'd stripped his top to play in his jeans. Some of the guys had whistled, given him praise.

*Shit, man, do you just bench press women in bed?*

*Do you bicep curl while your hair perms?*

And then he'd dunked the ball, holding onto the rim so he back-

flipped onto the court. Billy remembered howling triumphantly—

A quiet scoff came from Steve before he leaned toward a classmate. *“He’s a little intense, huh?”*

The guy adjusted his headband and shook his head. *“This is the beginning of the worst phys-ed yet. I can feel it.”*

*“Yeah, well, at least it’s our last,”* Steve said while returning to some sort of essay in his hands. He balanced a textbook on his knee to write on it, but mostly he just read the scrawled notes on the paper. Nancy’s notes, but all he wanted was to look at her hands writing and maybe reach for one. She’d gape at him, call him out, scold him even though it sounded like she liked being teased—

*Fuck this,* Billy grimaced, striding right out of that useless memory. He really didn’t get that infatuation. Nancy Too Skinny Wheeler had a permanent pout on her face like nothing would please her, and she’d definitely pointed it at him when he approached Steve at the Halloween party.

The beer had been just as unimpressive as everything else, but that made it easy to get down. His mouth still tingled with carbonation as he found them across the room. Nancy had seen him first, her body language being what made Steve turn around.

That had been a nice feeling, the dethroned king pulling his glasses off while his queen bitch scrambled right out of there. At least Steve had balls, ready to meet him eye to eye when cornered at a party.

Then Tommy dropped the news about Hawkins’ new keg record, and the thing that came out of Steve’s mouth was, *“That so? Well, congrats, man. You’ve got a hell of a burp coming, though, so be careful it doesn’t spiral into a vomit comet.”*

Somebody behind Billy laughed, but he couldn’t be bothered at the time to do more than glare and walk away. It was Halloween, and there was probably a cop in the neighborhood already, just waiting for a noise complaint. Harrington’s record had been easy to beat, and if he didn’t feel inclined to defend it, fine. It only cemented Billy’s impression of this town being easily impressed if Steve was its

pinnacle of prestige—

*Super intense, yeesh.*

Billy followed Steve's grateful escape to the kitchen, where Nancy had other ideas than sobriety. Well here was a surprise. Nancy gulping down jungle juice with Steve being the overbearing boyfriend.

*"We're just being stupid teenagers for the night. Wasn't that the deal?"*

Now that Billy thought about it, this was the night they broke up. It made more sense, now, that Steve's head would have been miles away from Billy, but now the latter was impressed. Nancy pounded a cup and didn't give a shit about the alcohol dripping on her face. She had spunk, like her mom.

Steve's memory lightened in patches, when whatever fight they were having eased up in favor of dancing. Billy wouldn't have pegged Nancy as much of a dancer, and maybe that was why Steve felt bubbly in the middle of such a weighty night. Too bad he didn't know it would be the last time he danced with her.

Billy almost left the memory, but Steve's gaze locked onto Nancy noticing her cup was empty and raced her to the punch bowl. Billy wanted to see this—had heard about it from like twelve different people who'd seen Nancy and Steve fight over the cup before red poured all over her white outfit.

Billy would've left the woman to drink her way to oblivion if she wanted it so damn badly, but Steve—princely, annoying fucking Steve—chased her all the way to the bathroom and had the grace to shut the door between his smashed girlfriend and the party.

*"Nance, I'm sorry... That's not coming off, Nance—"*

*"It's coming,"* she groaned.

Billy began to lean out of the bathroom, not caring for teenage drama that he didn't care for in the first place. Pulling himself from the memory had the same sort of sticky hesitancy of trying to set down a worn out, too often held photograph. Steve had been through this

memory a lot.

*"Let me take you home, okay? Come here, let me just take you home. Let me take you home, come on—"*

*"You-You wanted this!"*

*"No, I didn't want this. I told you to stop drinking,"* his voiced echoed, patiently.

*"It's bullshit—"*

*"No, it's not bullshit—"*

*"Bullshit!"*

*"—okay? No, it's not bullshit, Nancy—"*

*"No, you. You're bullshit."*

Billy glanced back. In a house with blaring music, Steve went deaf. It was hard not to watch.

*"W-What?"*

*"You-You're pretending like-like everything is okay. You know, like-like we didn't kill Barb!"*

Wait. What?

*But we didn't. We didn't!* Steve's brain fired off, but Nancy wasn't done.

*"Like, it's great. Like, we're in love and we're partying—yeah, let's par-party, huh? Party. We're partying... Th-This-This is bullshit."*

Speaking of vomit comets, Steve's stomach definitely whipped around the room before landing in a pathetic puddle on the floor. *"Like we're in love?"*

Billy felt the drunk heat of Nancy's cheek as if it were his own hand trying to cradle her face. *"It's bullshit."*



Steve tried to find something in her eyes. Maybe a shred of honesty in her drunk spite that would make everything else a lie. *“You don’t love me?”*

But she only repeated, a little too quietly, *“It’s bullshit.”*

Truth and lies were on the wrong sides of the scale as Steve reached behind her for the doorknob. His last solid moment of clarity at the party was passing Jonathan and experiencing a confusing mixture of, *There ya go, Nance, your real boyfriend’s here,* and *He’ll take care of her. I gotta leave before I explode.*

So who the hell is Barb?

Billy opened his eyes and blinked at a darker room than he remembered the sunny morning being—

Something tall and grey stood over him while Christmas lights flashed on his ceiling.

His back hit the wall and he chucked the only item he had—a pillow—at the thing and it went right through. Barely able to breathe, Billy’s chest shuddered in the sunny day, his ceiling fan making an ominous noise as it wobbled precariously and the pillow landed with a loud huff.

He startled again when the music switched to a voice announcing, *“Alrighty, it’s ten to twelve, and you know what that means: Saxophone Charlie...”*

Billy threw himself onto his feet, storming out of the house to get his ass to work, in the sun, and fill his head with obnoxious screams, the potent smells of sunscreen, and cheap hotdogs.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Poor Billy's got a lot of catching up to do. Thanks for reading! <3 <3

## 7. Cherry Juice

### Notes for the Chapter:

I didn't mean to write the majority of this during Mother's Day but here we are lol Steve takes Mrs. H on a mom date~

Steve slumped his way down the stairs, one hand ruffling his bedhead and the other adjusting his shorts waistband. Though the sleep had been good three nights in a row, he'd gone back to waking up like a gun had gone off next to his head.

That didn't bode well. That ominously rang of way too many visits with a certain vampire.

But Steve didn't have the capacity or the desire to think about that right now. He pulled the carton of eggs from the fridge the same moment something nudged his shoulder. His mother held the skillet out to him.

"Oh. Thanks."

She hummed a tired sound, similarly raking her fingers through her hair. She adjusted the tie of her robe around her nightgown as she went to lean her forearms on the end of the counter. "You have the feeling like you're off work today."

"Yeah, you?"

"Mmhm," she hummed again, distractedly sifting through a pile of half-opened mail. The same mail that had gone neglected since his dad went on his business trip.

"You haven't even had your coffee yet, hey. Put those down."

"I'll need to call your dad about some of these later," she ignored, lifting a page to frown at it from a better angle.

"Mom."

After another second, she looked up at him. His eyes flicked between her and the bills, invitations to parties Mr. Harrington was supposed to be the one attending, and credit card expenses being sent home from his business trip. Ever paranoid, his father had two copies of everything—one sent to the secretaries of his work, and the other for Mrs. Harrington to sort through. Steve had wondered more than once if the man ever said thank you, of if those had stopped with the flowers.

“What, baby?”

His eyes met hers. It had been a long time since she’d called him that.

There they stood, the pair of them with the world’s invoices between them. Things were easier when his only issue was his latest injury and his mom was the prettiest girl in the world.

Well. He had a couple of injuries of late.

Finally closing the fridge to toss the bacon package onto the counter, he mirrored her stance to say, “Hey, why don’t we go out today? You’ve probably gotta go to the bank, or something, and we can go out to eat after. It can be one of those dates we used to do.”

Her eyes wandered his face while he spoke before she snorted softly. “I called them dates to make you complain less during errands.”

“Yeah, so? Do you have stuff to do?”

“Oh,” she heaved, “of course I have stuff. And *you* need a haircut. I’ve been telling you for weeks.”

“Okay,” he stood up straight with a smile. “So: bank, hairdresser, and lunch? I’ll drive.”

Her fingertips pushed her cheek up while she shook her head with amusement. “Okay, Steve. And if you’re done with my book, I’d like it back sometime.”

It took him a second to remember. “Oh, that book. Uh...why do you need it?”

“Well, some of us in our old age need help with our spine and joints.”

Steve’s features got more and more tense with every word, until the last part took him by surprise. “Oh! Exercise book. Good good good... You have back problems?”

She peeked up at him but explained patiently, “We’ve got good skin but be careful when you’re my age.”

Steve relaxed to pivot and lay bacon in the skillet. “You’re not old, mom. I didn’t know you had back problems. Shouldn’t you be seeing a doctor for them?”

“I’ve seen a few. An athletic physical therapist in New York recommended yoga to me years ago.”

“There isn’t some kinda surgery—?”

“Alas, it’s the upkeep that my body needs, not a one-time fix. The stretches and habits in that book hold my body together the way it needs.”

“Huh...” Steve considered. “Do you want company?”

His head turned at her soft snort. “I’m sorry, but I see you breaking like a reed. I’m sure you’re strong enough for some poses, but not flexible.”

“Wha—” he gaped. “I was doing some of ‘em when you got home the other day. Alright, after eggs and toast, show me what you’ve got.”

“I’ll show you what you don’t got.”

“MOM!”

However, she might’ve had a point.

“My hamstring doesn’t do that.”

“You need to do this modified version here,” she said, flipping back a page.

“Why is this a ‘pigeon’ pose? More of a...dead flamingo situation,” he strained, one leg curled in front of him while the other stretched behind him.

“Just sit criss-cross and try and rest your stomach on your shins.”

He could do that; planting his elbows on her white carpet to hold his head while she lifted herself and leg back into three-legged dog before moving on to the other side. “So, can you do the upside-down ones?”

“What do you young people say? I’m not going to *dunk on you* that much today.”

“Jesus Christ,” he marveled, but his scoff dissolved into laughter.

Morning routines complete, Steve found one of his rare pairs of khaki shorts since he knew his mother didn’t go anywhere looking shy of immaculate. In the summer heat, though, he lacked a pristine t-shirt collection, so he went with his most wrinkle-free one, and they left for town.

As he pulled into the Main Street parking lot, his mother said, “We’re early enough that this shouldn’t take long—”

“Stay put!” Steve burst from the car.

“Steve? What—?”

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” he chimed, running around the car to open the door for her.

“Steve,” she barked flatly.

“It’s a date!” he all but sang, holding out his hand.

She laughed despite herself, muttering, “Good lord,” and let him pull her from the seat. With his mother on his arm, Steve waited at the bank, and then they walked together to the hairdresser’s down the street. Folks waved to them or called out their hellos before Steve held the door open, and the owner all but ambushed them on the other side.

“Mrs. Harrington! You cannot believe how happy I am to see you both.”

“Oh, well, thank you. What’s the matter?” Mrs. Harrington asked.

She pushed Steve toward an available chair while the owner disclosed, “Starcourt has its own salon, and I can count the number of customers we’ve had over the past month on one hand! It’s like everyone’s forgotten us.”

Steve’s stylist intercepted his attention by rotating his chair so they both faced the mirror. “What would you like, dear?”

He pulled his hands through it self-consciously. “Probably a couple of inches should go.”

“Same style? You look like you’re in between do’s right now.”

“Yeah, I haven’t decided on anything yet.”

“Want some highlights? They don’t take long and it’s a good way to kick start a summer glow.”

Steve grimaced slightly. “Mmnah, my hair’s too dark to pull off blond streaks.”

“Caramel ones would work. Just a lighter brown over the dark. When the sun fades it to gold, it will look natural.”

“Caramel?” his brows lifted, consulting himself in the mirror while she picked a comb from her collection.

After getting it stuck in residual hair product twice, she touched his shoulder. “I’ll need to shampoo you first. You can decide during that. What about you, Mrs. Harrington? Ready for a summer spruce up?”

But his mother’s prolonged silence turned heads to her, inducing a pressured, “I’ve been lingering on something, but I haven’t committed yet.”

The salon owner exclaimed, “Is it the short style you’ve spoken about? *Again?* You talk about it every time I see you.”

“Summer is beautiful for pixie cuts,” her counterpart agreed.

“No, no, not as short as that,” Mrs. Harrington countered.

“I keep telling you, with your face, you’d look good with anything,” the owner pushed.

“And it’s hair,” Steve seconded. His mother’s gaze met his. “It grows back, right?”

Her wary expression slowly melted as she twirled the ends of her hair unconsciously. Steve and his stylist smiled to one another on their way to the sinks as Mrs. Harrington uttered behind them, “Let’s...go a little short, just to see, and then I’ll decide how much further.”

For encouragement, Steve decided on the highlights. His stylist laughed when he nodded to the music playing overhead, causing the tin foil to flap around his head. Positioned in a chair with a pile of magazines, he peeked at his mother’s progress, but true to his hairdresser’s word, his highlights did not take long, and soon he was back at the sinks and at her mercy with the scissors.

“There we go,” she chimed, pulling his hair back to induce his looking up as well. “Feel refreshed?”

Steve picked at his hair, the way his side-parting swooshed over his forehead like it always did, but this time it glistened like amber honey. “Ooh, this looks great! Caramel delicious—”

The stylist laughed but the owner curtailed them by announcing, “Starcourt will have nothing on you two.”

His jaw went slack under wide eyes as his mother stood from the salon chair. Certainly longer than a pixie, but not enough to hang past her jaw, his mother’s dark hair swooshed elegantly around her face. Short in the back, longer in the front, the new-age bob had more edges than a 1950s housewife, but not enough hair spray for a contemporary rocker. Her dangling gold earrings really popped against her dark hair now. She looked ready for some pearls or laurel leaves to go in her hair, like somebody from the roaring 20’s posters she liked to frame in her office.

“Mom! You look cooler than me! That’s not allowed.”

Her smile was cheeky as she felt around her head and the owner guffawed. “Learn from your mother, honey.”

His hairdresser unbuttoned the cape around his neck to let him stand. He rubbed his nape, feeling the shorter hair while he said, “Thanks for not messing up my gauze.”

“Sure thing, hun. You’re not the first young man to come in covered in hickeys. At least you have the courtesy to cover them.”

Steve’s eyes strained a little too wide before he settled with a huffed, “Right.”

After his mother paid, Steve offered his arm once more. “Do you want to walk there? Show it off.”

“I don’t think it’s going to sink in until tomorrow what I’ve done,” she mused.

“You look great.”

“Your father likes long hair,” she muttered, looking down the street before they crossed.

Steve wondered if she said that without meaning to. He squeezed her hand between his arm and ribcage. “I think you look great. And short hair is trending on ladies while long hair is popular on guys. If he likes long hair so much, he can get with the times himself.”

*Micky’s* was a restaurant that had already seen its heyday, but it could still be relied on for prom dinners and special events, or even a late lunch. A mix between cream walls and dark woods of Italian romance, as well as the black and white diamond flooring of a diner, *Micky’s* was the place if you wanted your alfredo with a milkshake.

Removing his mother’s hand to gently press on her back, Steve directed her to follow the hostess while he quickly cornered a waitress. He pushed Miss Hendrix’s twenty dollars into her hand with very specific instructions.



“And those parmesan-pecorino fries, okay?” he finished. He nodded deeply to gauge how much the woman had retained. He couldn’t tell if she looked insulted or simply overwhelmed, but any longer and his mom would investigate what took him so long to sit down.

Just short of crash landing into the booth, he lifted his menu to look productive while his mother said, “Their menu is too large. How does one decide on anything?”

“Eventually you just get tired of reading and choose from what you’ve seen.”

“And if you’ve only read the sides?”

“The pasta salad and bread sticks are great.”

She shook her head around a smile before her fingertips fiddled with her new ends. Steve blinked softly and reached across for her hand. She looked at him inquiringly. “You look beautiful. Really. Don’t worry about it.”

Before she could react or respond, a tall glass and its metal counterpart arrived to the table. Mrs. Harrington’s mouth opened, and then broke into a grin. Her hand shielded her eyes as if the mountain of cherries on top of the chocolate shake shined too brightly. Red syrup could be seen dripping down the insides of the glass.

Steve gave the waitress a thankful smirk while his mom gasped, “Are you ser—how do you remember this?”

A large helping of julienne fries dusted with cheese and herbs clapped the table to mark the waitress’s departure. Steve plucked the first cherry off the pile. “Oh my god, are you kidding? You changed my childhood with this shake! I was coming down with the flu and all I wanted to eat were cherries.”

“But all you could keep down were fluids,” she seconded, plucking a cherry for herself. “I asked them to top a shake with maraschino juice. Some kind of misunderstanding happened and we got a little bit of milkshake with our cherries.”

A fresh smile wriggled onto Steve's face as he managed to push a steel straw under the fruit. He rotated the glass for her to get the first sip. "It's been your guilty pleasure for your birthday."

She inhaled during an eye roll. "Really, how do you know that?"

"I'm a romantic, what can I say? I remember the important things."

"When is my birthday?"

His mouth paused over the straw. "Uh—September."

"The whole month? Hm, I like that."

"I thought you might," he flashed a cocky smile and resumed his sip. Mrs. Harrington meanwhile picked at the fries until enough milkshake was exposed for dipping.

\* \* \*

After they pulled into their driveway, Mrs. Harrington peered at the sky while Steve unlocked the front doors. "We should work on the pool while the heat's broken."

Steve briefly scrunched his face. Fries and a shake equaled a nap, but he led the way through the house and back under the grey afternoon. His mother emptied the skimmers while he checked the pH and unwrapped chlorine tablets as large as hockey pucks. When he saw his mother inserting the leaf net onto one of the poles, he said, "There's no point before it rains."

"The skimmers can only take so much, and if too much sinks to the bottom, we'll have algae. Get the brush."

His shoulders slumped. "If the pool's getting a full scrub down, I'm turning on some music."

She raised no complaint, and together they used the extendable poles to clean the pool. At least, until Steve's knees bounced with the music, and he hummed his way around the pool to clash with his mother's path.

"Oh, 'scuse me, sorry. So sorry," he said bumping his hip against hers.

"Steve—"

"What's with this concrete, right? I remember having more room to dance."

"Steve—" she all but snorted.

"There's not enough room to dance and clean. Guess we just gotta choose one," he declared, letting his pole lean on the edge of the pool and sag further into the water.

"Incorrigible! You..." But her chastising faded into mirthful glee as she let him take her hand and twirl her into revolutions around the pool. Steve might not have known how to classically dance, but she sure did. Holding her arm level on the mantle of his shoulders, she guided them to the open lounge portion of concrete.

"When did you last swing dance?" she challenged as she stepped back to take his other hand.

"With you, when I was eleven," he grinned, falling into step with her. He was clumsy and she was grace; he overzealous and she patient and refined, but the latter won out.

"I could be the Astaire to your Ginger!" he grinned as they came back together and he guided another rotation.

"You're more of a Danny Kaye. We can swing but neither of us knows tap. But you move as much as Astaire does."

"The whole point is to show the girl off. I've got to do something to match up."

Her head fell back with her laughter and she let him twirl her several times. She caught herself with an arm on his shoulder blade, they bowed forward and back as he said, "What's that movie with Fred Astaire and the brunette you used to watch?"

"*Band Wagon*? Cyd Charisse. I prefer *Swing Time*, though."

“Why do you like the black and white ones so much?” he chimed as the radio switched to a Betty Wright song. “Charisse looked hot in that red dress.”

His mother brought them to a swaying stop. “No, baby, I can’t keep up with Betty Wright—I’m out of breath. And there’s more integrity to the monochromatic films. Once color appeared, it was all about the shock factor of colorful costumes and risqué choreography.”

“Yeah, that’s why they’re great,” he teased, turning the music down. He looked over his shoulder at his mother heading inside while he retrieved the poles.

“I’m making coffee. Do you want some?”

“Love some!”

The wind of the oncoming storm pulled at his hair as he made quick work of the utensils and jogged into the house—hopping to a sliding stop on the kitchen counter. He chuckled in the face of his mother’s deciding whether to scold him or not. She chose to mutter a, “Good grief,” with a playful swat to his chin.

After mulling the coffee grinds into the portafilter, Mrs. Harrington swirled hot water in their cups before pouring his coffee first, complete with steamed milk. Steve sighed a relieved, “Thanks,” before risking a burn to taste it.

“If you rush like that, you won’t savor it,” she reminded, making quick work emptying the portafilter for a fresh cup.

“I’ll savor it, I’ll savor it. It’s good! Even better since you never let me use the machine.”

“I’d happily risk you breaking something if you just cleaned it properly afterwards.”

“Oh, you know what, on second thought,” he rolled his eyes dramatically, inciting another smirk from her. For a while, only the growling machine and screech of the steamed milk filled the kitchen. He looked down at the splash of brown sugar she’d tossed over the foam in his cup. “I miss when you used to spoil me. Before dad’s

expectations got in the way.”

She turned around slowly, stirring her coffee. “My mother used to say, ‘If you’re spoiling a child, consider every moment tenfold. Spoil them the first ten years of their life, and they’ll be happy ‘til a hundred.’”

Steve’s smile began to fade. His eyes wandered elsewhere, unable to meet hers in agreement—

“I didn’t agree with her at all on that.”

He peeked back up. She licked her spoon, set it in the sink, and rotated to lean against the counter beside him. “When you water a flower, it doesn’t just stay there. It evaporates, gets used, falls out the bottom of the pot. So you keep watering, because as much as the flower needs it, so do we. Every moment might’ve been tenfold for you, but it was just that moment for me. I tried to give us as many as possible.”

“Then why’d you stop?” he asked quietly.

She shrugged a shoulder. “We got busy. School and friends and extracurriculars filled your time, your father’s business and my own work filled mine. We each went our own way, and a mother umbrella doesn’t help you grow in the sun.”

“Never stopped dad from being a whole damn awning,” he grumbled.

“Gentle.”

“Sorry... But he was. Still is.”

“He used to want something from you,” she admitted, “but now he’s just worried you’ll never find what you want.”

“That’s *not* true,” he scoffed. “Now you’re just lying for my benefit.”

“Fine, *I’m* worried you’ll never find what you want. You’ve never wavered like this before. You’ve always been the kind to blaze ahead, no matter how reckless the task seemed. There’s always been something clear in mind that you wanted.”

“Yeah, well...mostly I just wanted dad off my back. It was easy to go in any direction when he’s painting straight lines.”

Mrs. Harrington made a flat, sarcastic sound. “Welcome to adulthood. It’s an opaque cloud, and we’re all bumping into each other. Does that raise your confidence or weaken it?”

His features flattened while he absorbed this and decided, “That sucks! You’re supposed to have answers.”

Her head fell back with her mirth. “You find those every now and then—”

*Dingdong.*

“I’ll get it,” she declared, setting her cup beside his hip on her route to the foyer. She opened the door to the young man squinting at the first drops falling from the sky. His blue eyes slid down to her, and widened. “Hi, Billy.”

“Mrs. Harrington,” he crooned, taking his time to analyze her new hair, gently flushed cheeks, and overall energy she had lacked during their first encounter. “You look like summer.”

She smiled with the dismissal, “Thank you, Billy. Steve’s just in the kitchen.”

“Who?”

She sent a more genuine smirk over her shoulder, but he couldn’t help but smile at her raised brow. Mrs. Wheeler blushed like a peach when she thought he wasn’t looking. It wasn’t often a woman called him out, and with such dismissive grace. Mrs. H may have looked like polished brass, but she was hiding some experienced steel.

“Steve, it’s for you,” she announced upon arriving to the kitchen. Her son looked up from a magazine he’d pulled from the stack of mail, but neither he nor Billy said anything. “Billy, do you drink coffee?”

“I do, if you’re offering. Black.”

“It’ll be an espresso unless you want an Americano.”

“Espresso? I don’t mind being fancy.”

He ran his hand along the countertop, feeling Steve’s attention on him. He turned toward it and found a blunt, gaping stare. *Are you serious right now?*

Billy simply eased his elbow onto the counter and crossed his ankles. Steve rolled his eyes, turning the page of his magazine while he exhaled through his nose. Billy watched Mrs. Harrington swirl hot water in a glass before it caught the espresso drip. “I wouldn’t have expected you to know your way around a barista machine.”

“Eventually you get tired of people making your drinks wrong,” she replied, earning a chuckle from him. Turning around, she set his glass next to him. “You’re done. Milk’s in the fridge if you change your mind.”

Steve intercepted, “Mom, I’ll clean up if you have stuff to do.”

She turned an intrigued expression to him and as if accepting a challenge, handed him the portafilter. “Alright, then. I’ll be in my office if you boys need something.”

“Thanks again, Mrs. Harrington,” Billy purred as Steve hopped off the counter.

“You’re welcome, Billy,” she replied on her way out. Steve let the sink run while he shook his head, watching Billy take his first sips of espresso. He frowned over it like most people do over strong coffee, but Steve wasn’t buying it.

“You don’t know what a Caffé Americano is, do you?”

The expression Billy gave him was dull annoyance compared to the bright attention he gave to Steve’s mother. “What are you, flexing your country club shit at me?”

Steve huffed a mirthless laugh as water ran through the filter. “It’s an espresso mixed with hot water. Figured you should know, what with how bitter you are, already. You should dilute that. Speaking of: what the hell?”

Billy's brows lifted over another sip before he licked his lips. "I don't follow."

"Well which is it? Food? Blood?"

"I can do both."

After a moment, Steve could only shake his head while wiggling the portafilter components free of excess water. "Sounds like the weirdest fetish of all time."

But the light smack of Billy's tongue turned his attention to the cup being set on the counter, and Billy's slow grin. Sharp canines slid out of his gums, the points dimpling his lip. Steve's own lips parted, awed and dumbstruck. "More than a fetish, blood bag. Don't get it twisted."

Steve unfolded a clean dishtowel to rest the metal parts. "That's how this works, now? I just look the other way whenever you want a drink?"

"Is there a problem?" Billy shifted his weight, fangs retracted.

"Apart from the general obliteration of my pride, yeah, I've got some questions."

Billy laughed, "You know I don't give a shit about your pride."

"What is it about your bite that makes me act like my brain's floating in Everclear?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Venom, maybe."

Steve all but lurched forward. "*You don't know?*"

"What's it matter?" he grimaced.

"What's it—" Steve planted a hand on his waist. "If you take too much, and I *get* too much, what's going to happen to me? That's what matters."

Slow amusement bloomed on Billy's face. "Are you worried about overdosing on me?"



“I don’t appreciate that phrasing. But—yes, for lack of another way of putting it.”

Billy’s lashes drooped to half-mast. “I doubt it.”

Steve’s jaw slid to the side as he fumed. “That’s great. Great. You’re full of consoling words.”

Billy finished his espresso despite the scalding nature of it and commenced, “Are you afraid of getting wet or are we going to your room, since I assume your open floor plan is off limits for *tasteless things*.”

Steve stared at the sassy lilt he used before glancing out the windows being peppered with rain. He scratched his jaw, not much liking either of those choices.

But the unspoken option was waking up from an Upside-Down nightmare.

“Come on.”

Billy rolled his hips along the edge of the counter to follow in Steve’s wake. As they pivoted to ascend the stairs, Steve peeked at Billy’s shoes, weighing how likely he would be to leave them in the foyer. Billy wore his rarely seen black Converse, which probably explained how he moved quietly enough to not warrant Mrs. Harrington telling him to remove them first.

Steve left them alone as he directed, “This way.”

Billy was looking down the other end of the hallway, but Steve could feel when he padded behind him.

“Holy shit,” Billy scoffed. Steve had gone around the bed to open the blinds for natural light, but upon turning around, Billy looked too big to be in his bedroom. “Your room is like a prison cell.”

“Are we doing this, or are you judging my wallpaper?”

“Both. Definitely both,” he laughed a little. Billy looked a little bit horrified, wide eyes darting around the room. Well, at least he looked

the way Steve felt. “Yikes, man.”

“Shut up. Are we standing or sitting?”

“Don’t be so tense, Harrington,” Billy sang.

“Look, does it have to be my neck every time?” he asked while feeling for the gauze clamp.

Billy stepped forward, getting his hands smacked away before he did the same to Steve so he could unwrap his meal personally. “Not really, but my venom reaches your brain faster if it’s the neck.”

“Venom. So we’re calling it venom. Okay.”

Billy gave him a look. “Do you always ramble when you’re nervous?”

“No, but you do, from what I recall. Everything about you orbits your mouth. Smoking, biting, getting mouthy during a game, a fight—ah!”

Billy stared, expressionless before he ignored Steve to bite the place he’d tasted at Alex’s party. He’d meant to console Steve by telling him it had finally healed nicely, but that was out the window with the rain anyway.

Steve dumbly tried to hang onto Billy’s arm holding his nape, but his weight pitched and the wall caught him. Billy followed, humming slighting against the landing before wet sounds followed. Steve’s swallow pushed against his lips, a sharp inhale sounding underneath Billy’s tongue dragging over his skin.

When Billy eased back, Steve fell forward into his hands. “Woah, easy, easy. You act like you’ve never been bitten by a vampire before.”

“Fuck...off,” Steve pushed.

“There it is,” Billy purred. “I was worrying I’d sucked the fire right out of you.”

He had to admit, Steve impressed him by heaving his head up from Billy’s shoulder to look him in the face before hooded eyes dropped

to bloodstained lips.

Then Steve bit him. Right on the mouth.

Billy's lashes fluttered in time with his heart as a distinct tongue swiped over his lips. Steve came away to thunk his head on the wall, lips looking as cherry kissed as his own.

"Nasty," Billy said, but there isn't any grit to it. It sounds more like a question.

"It's mine, isn't it?" Steve sassed, slurring his words. "Asshole."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Overdosing on Love definitely sounds like an 80s song, if it doesn't exist already.

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## 8. Nightmare Town

“Put me on the bed.”

“You got a lot of nerve—”

Billy hadn't recognized his own voice when he said that. Even now, in the blinding gold, morning light reflecting off the concrete of the community pool, he couldn't name the new level of soft...huskiness his voice had taken in Steve's room.

*Hoarse*, he decided. *Steve took me by surprise.*

Steve had begun to slide down the wall, and seemed intent on taking Billy with him. Hitching his hands under Steve's armpits like a child, Billy heaved him up with every intention of dumping him onto the bed, but hadn't paid enough attention to how close it stood to the window.

“Woah—shit!”

A bang preceded the bed skidding a couple of inches before the pair of them fell over the mattress. A new, high-pitched sound came from Steve as he drunkenly pushed at Billy's thigh. “You're...on muh... dick! Your knee's on my dick!”

He reached a new octave when Billy gripped him through his tight khakis. “Shut the hell up, or you'll never use it again.”

“You're so mean!” Steve whined. “Why're you such a douche? *God...*”

“You turn into such a kid—”

“And what are you? Still in high school? Get your hand off my dick.”

A low growl burned in Billy's throat as he overlapped the fresh bite on Steve's neck with another. *Nobody ever talks this much.*

Steve's hand that wasn't trapped underneath Billy fumbled on his shoulder, finding his hair. Through the gentle, wet sounds, Billy heard Steve coo, “Oh. Soft.”

*No shit, it's soft*, Billy had thought then as well as now, one ankle crossed over his knee in his lifeguard seat. He supposed, if somebody really tried, they could keep their brain in check like a splash of sobriety in the midst of too much alcohol. He'd never had the occasion to try it, since his meals were more dine and dash experiences. Given his previous status as Keg King, Steve might have more experience navigating intoxication than Billy had given him credit. But two bites turned Steve back into mumbling goo—apart from his coming on Billy's thigh.

*That* was a surprise for both of them. When he'd adjusted his position over Steve, it didn't occur to him that his leg remained between Steve's, or that his pelvis had matched up groin to groin. So when his thigh gave a little lift to Steve's balls and the friction of their clothes did the rest, the fractured sound that came out of him lifted Billy's head.

While Billy scrutinized his face to gauge if what happened really *happened*, Steve blinked glassy eyes at his ceiling. "Oh no..."

Steve was fading, and fast. Billy grasped his jaw to line their eyes up. "Did you just cream your pants?"

"Don't...hit me."

He couldn't help but grin and laugh quietly. "I guess I should be flattered."

"Don'...mahhk...fun uh me."

"You still need that rebound." He gave Steve's cheek enough of a slap to make a sound, but he only warranted a weak groan.

"Not muh...my type."

"What? Male and better looking?"

"Yer fine. But I don' luv you."

"Jesus, you're one of those. Wheeler really put your dick in a cage with a padlock, huh?"

But now, as he whistled at kids fighting for their turn at the diving board, the other part of that statement ricocheted around his skull.

*Yer fine.*

Someone was a little too honest. Billy almost wished he'd pestered him a little more, but in typical Steve fashion, he passed out. Billy had preoccupied himself with examining how his bite flushed Steve's skin with inflammation, the holes puckering with visible irritation and reluctance to close. It was like Steve's body was fighting his venom, not allowing it to do its damn job in taking care of him. Billy had found his cotton pads and gauze to rewrap his neck, frowning as he moved the clamp into place. He and Steve certainly mixed together like oil and water, but this was something else.

When he approached the bedroom door, he glanced back at the cold, stormy light contrasting over Steve's new, warm highlights. Billy let himself fall into a moment of vacancy as he reached a hand toward the straight tresses.

He felt strong. Blood was adrenaline and nutrients and *life*. It feels like sunlight in his veins. His fingertips rustled over Steve's hair, feeling both the silken threads as well as an amplified, physical warmth. Billy sure as hell wasn't calling it a blood connection, but he could say Steve's aura had more of a glow today.

Billy crushed Steve's hair under his hand, as if to send away whatever train of thought had taken hold of him. Steve uttered a soft hum in his sleep as Billy shut the door behind him.

Now usually, key rooms stood out in a house. Like music, the one with the stereo was the most lived in, the most loved. Steve's room had radio fuzz. With his blood washing through Billy's system, he could feel the place as if he were looking through infrared goggles. He didn't need specific memories to identify things—could feel as easily as Steve did, that the room at the end of the corridor was his favorite place in the house.

Slowly approaching the white door so he did not disturb Mrs. Harrington inside, Billy let the snippets of Steve's brain fall into place. Mrs. Harrington had called this room an office. Steve saw it as

the *green room*. The room with *flowers*. The *mom's real bedroom when his dad was being too much* room.

*It's our room.*

And boy, did it glow.

Something...hurt inside Billy. Like when a bucket of sand gets buried under high tide and you have to fight the ocean's suction, the weight of sand and water to pull it up...a memory dredged painfully to the surface. His own memory, which he did not want to revisit, but he was already small enough to sit on his mother's dresser. Watching her fix her natural, bed-flattened curls with a hot wand. The memory warmed his skin like the sun, soaking through him but also sizzling painfully at the touch.

Shaking his head, Billy turned away, intent on leaving this Frank Lloyd Wright wannabe house—

"What the...hell?" he exhaled slowly, staring down a very different corridor. Dark and menacing, Billy could only process a cold dampness and a sporadically ribbed texture on the round walls...

*"I'm in such deep shit."*

Steve's voice. Something itched on his face—Billy's face—

He might as well have slapped himself, the hand rubbing his mouth jarred Billy from the vision. Swiveling behind him and forward, he looked around the Harrington's house before he made double time down the stairs.

With a hand on his car, he glanced up from the curb at the perfect American dream home. "What kinda nightmares you having, Harrington?" he asked no one.

\* \* \*

Robin placed a yellow card on the counter. "Draw two."

Steve pulled himself from his thoughts to analyze the deck on the counter as well as in his hand. He set down a similar card, but green.

“Ladies first, I insist.”

Robin plucked another *Uno* card from her hand. “I said, draw two. And if we’re playing by house rules—my house, that is—those stack. Draw six.”

Steve stared at the blue card and sighed, slouching on the ice cream case while reaching for fresh cards. Robin smirked contently with a glance at the dwindling shoppers passing on their way out of the closing mall. “By the way, with clothing stores literally surrounding us, you can buy your own cravat, you know.”

“Oh, you’re never getting this thing back,” he disregarded, organizing his cards.

Her eyes lolled as if a full eye roll cost too much effort. “What, the great Steve Harrington can’t be seen buying accessories?”

“You sound like Billy, talking like that, and I don’t care who sees me buying anything. I’d just rather spend my money on worthwhile things since I’ve already got yours.”

He pressed his lips into a merciless smile as he set down a blue draw four. “Stack this, Buckley.”

Robin took her cards with grace and asked, “Are you and that guy friends now?”

“*No-ho!*” Steve laughed mirthlessly. “*Absolutely* not. Friends is...*not* what I’d call us.”

“Are you forbidden lovers stuck between too much sentiment and not enough undertaking while you both pretend the other person doesn’t notice?”

Steve’s jaw had gone slack. “Huh? No...whatever all that was, no. We’ve just gotten...stuck in a loop somewhere—What? Why are you making that face?”

“This is my face. Don’t be rude,” she retorted, but she placed her next card down with a bend so it clapped the counter.



Steve shook his head. "I always feel like I'm taking some kind of test with you."

"You haven't failed anything," she consoled. "What do you mean, 'a loop'?"

"It's like, you know, favors. First I owe him. Then he owes me. We lost track somewhere."

"Then how do you get out of it?"

Steve exhaled so his lips flapped together. "One of us drags our ass out of Hawkins, I guess."

"So, never."

He slanted a glare at her. "Please don't premonition me. I can't be stuck in this suit forever."

She laughed, "Yeah well, while you're in it, tonight's your turn to take the garbage out. Be careful the bag doesn't tear; lactose has been stewing in there all week."

Not the first time since he'd been hired, Steve cursed his luck that he was hired at Scoops. Being a food vendor, their rules were different than the rest of the mall's. A trashcan outside the store was the janitorial staff's turf; inside Scoops Ahoy, though, they had health and sanitation guidelines to meet. And too many parents ordered double or triple-decker cones for kids who could only finish one. Technically they were supposed to replace the bags every day, but Robin didn't like the plastic waste of half-filled bags, and a good handful of napkins kept the smell down until they were full.

As he carefully lowered the vile bag and installed a fresh one, he was glad for the lighter load. Cramming napkins into each bag may have defeated the purpose of reducing waste, but heaving a load of milk and sugar outside was not worth the scant tips. It also helped, having a coworker who gave as much of a shit about the rules as he did. As much as Robin liked to point out his mistakes, she also made his workload easier.

"Careful!" she ordered while he moved like a bumper car through the

parlor's back doors.

"Do you wanna do this?"

"If you leave a trail of milk behind you, I'm taking your tips!"

"Yeah? What are you gonna buy with your riches in dimes and pennies?"

"A new coworker if you keep at it."

"Shut up. You'd miss me."

"Oh, how I wish I had the luxury of mindless workdays," she lamented. "It's what I thought I signed up for when you showed up."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me," he chimed, finally managing to wrestle the bags into the employee corridor.

"I did not say you supply riveting conversation."

"Too late! And don't you dare rig my cards! Your reign in *Uno* is ending tonight!"

The door clattered shut and he met another mall employee making a similar trek outside. "Hey, Phil."

"Hey," he laughed, having heard everything. He gestured toward the trash bags. "Did you lose another game?"

"No, this is just routine. You couldn't pay me to gamble against Robin. Thanks."

Phil held the door for him and kicked the doorstep under it so they weren't locked out. "Why don't you two just get it already?"

"Get what?" Steve hauled the first bag into the dumpster. They both glanced at a white, inventory van cruising through the back lots. The driver lifted his fingers off the steering wheel in a wave, which they returned.

"Tickets to Mars. In *bed*, Harrington, come on."

Steve burst out laughing. “Me and Robin? No way. She’s a total band dweeb and we see each other way too much for that sort of thing to work.”

Phil crooned an intrigued hum. “I don’t see her all that often. What d’you think?”

Steve tried to suppress his grimace as he peered at Philip Sanchez. His glossy black curls looked straight out of a *Prince* music video and his skin was a bit too sun-kissed for a Starcourt employee.

“No offense, but Robin would eat you for breakfast.”

“Really? You don’t think she’d go for this?” Phil waved a hand over himself. “I’m the only *latino* in a hundred miles with curls like this!”

“Dude, everyone knows you work at the salon,” Steve laughed. “How many holes have you punched out of your tanning bed membership card? I think Robin cares less about looks and more about brains. Or whatever the hell band girls like. You got a trumpet?”

“I sing,” Phil offered.

“You’re screwed. In the bad way.”

Phil held out his cigarette box in offering, but Steve refused. “I think you’re selling me short, *marinero*.”

Steve twirled his scooper while he ruminated, “I distinctly remember her telling some guy with the audacity to flirt that she would stick her scooper so far up his ass that she’d serve him his own shit and he’d thank her for it.”

Smoke spewed from his mouth as Phil guffawed. “Holy hell. Savage.”

“Hey, good luck. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you—*wha-what the shit!*”

A feral, feline sound jerked their heads down as Steve lifted his foot off the asphalt. The mangled clump of fur on his sock came with it. Reaching down, threads popped from needle-sharp claws before Steve managed to detach the cat from his ankle.

“Aw,” Phil chimed. “A *gatita*. I think? Speaking of salons, she needs one, bad.”

As the creature wriggled under its scruff in his grip, Steve scrutinized the black gnarl on the nose and in patches across her fur. “Can I use one of the sinks?”

Phil’s expression opened like he hadn’t meant it to be a real offer. After a moment of consideration on his cigarette, he nodded, “Give me half an hour. Most of the ladies won’t wanna deal with the risk of fleas, but they should be gone soon. There’s some drag-themed bingo happening in the next town over that they’re all excited for. In the meantime, get that thing a straight jacket, or you’ll be all sorts of infected.”

Steve rolled the creature in his blue shirt to contain its struggling while he said, “I haven’t seen any strays around here. Have you?”

“Nope, but that little one’s too small to be wandering too far from it’s mama. You in the market for a new pet?”

Reversing their route into the mall, Steve huffed, “Yeah right. My parents let me have a dog for a week before they told me we were just pet-sitting.”

“Then why are you saving this one?”

Steve glanced at him. “What do you mean? She’s got shit all over her face—can barely open one eye. That’s not right.”

Phil held up his hands. “Okay, okay, Sir Hero. Thirty minutes. I’ll have a sink ready for her. Bring Robin.”

Steve really should have seen that coming, but they parted ways without complaint. Shouldering open the door to Scoops, he hissed despite no one else being in the store, “Robin! Robin!”

She rotated with a blatant *What the fuck?* look on her face through the window to the back room. Her eyes darted between his red-striped tank top underneath the bundle in his shirt, and Steve’s stupid grin. She frowned, “What am I looking at—is that a cat?”

“Do you have time to run to the food court? Get one of those boiled chicken sandwiches without mayo. Or the fish fillet.”

“Uh—sure? Steve, where the hell did you find—?”

“Now! We’ve got thirty minutes to close up and get to the salon! Oh, and heads up: Phil’s got a crush on you.”

“Who?” she piped on her way out.

“Ouch,” he laughed. “I’ll explain later.”

Steve didn’t dare unwrap the furious kitten until its nose wiggled at Robin unwrapping a flavorless sandwich. As she broke pieces of fish onto the table, Steve moved the cat in place while he explained, “Phil works at the salon. He’s the one who always orders the mango sorbet. And he complains that the food court doesn’t serve *aqua fresca*. I ran into him on my way outside. He’s letting me use a sink to clean her off.”

“Oh, him,” she remembered, and then frowned. “He likes me?”

“Let’s say that it’s a requirement you show up to the salon for services rendered. Please let him down after tonight. And gently. He’s a nice guy.”

“Just focus on the cat,” she diverted. “It looks like she’s got an eye infection.”

“I can’t afford a vet,” Steve admitted both to her and himself. It began to dawn on him what he’d volunteered for.

“There’s an emergency animal hospital an hour and a half away. What they lack in proximity, they make up for in pricing. My mom used to work there.”

“Your mom’s a vet?”

“A volunteer, but we don’t have any foster care meds anymore.”

Steve gave this some thought and then unwillingly grimaced. “An hour and a half? Sheesh...”

Robin passed him the fillet and found the clipboard to do a rushed inventory check. “How’d you find a kitten anyway? Strays are fast.”

Steve plucked breading away from the fish fragments. The kitten let him scratch its fur while it was distracted. “Phil said it’s too young to be away from its mom, so maybe it’s not fast. And the whole attacking my leg thing. I think she was desperate.”

Robin snorted from the front room, “Is that how girls come onto you?”

Steve barked a, “Ha!” and filled an ice cream cup with water. The cat drank like it had never tasted fresh water in its life.

Ice cream containers sealed, the case locked, register counted, and the floors mopped, they closed Scoops and used the employee labyrinth to reach the salon. Phil opened the door when they knocked and grinned at Robin. “Last sink on the right.”

Steve ventured a glance back at Robin sticking her tongue against her top lip. All he could do was send an apologetic look to her and rush over the glossy, granite floor. He’d never actually seen the Starcourt salon, but he understood its appeal. Black ceramic, shining brass, and Italian beige granite made it a luxury unknown to Hawkins. It felt a little special, twisting the gold handle so water poured into the black sink while he waited for it to turn warm.

Meanwhile, Phil organized the scissor drawer at his station before turning around—

Robin held up a finger against Phil’s mouth opening. “Shut it. We both know you’re trying to measure how likely you are to get into Steve’s pants.”

Phil looked like the electricity had gone out behind his eyes before he smirked. “I knew it. You’re both way too pretty to not fall into bed together. Harrington’s never been one to say no to a fun time.”

“We know better than to out someone without their permission,” she smiled. Threatening.

“Fair point, calm down. Then spill: while you’re going to Annie

Lennox concerts, what's keeping Steve Harrington from falling into beds like a frog visits lily pads? Particularly mine. His last relationship was *months* ago, and from what I hear, he's been uncharacteristically drifting without landing on anyone. A freshly graduated specimen out in the great, wide world? It's a whole pond to explore. But where is he?"

Phil had crossed his arms to lean back against a chair while they heard the gentle clatter of bottles behind the partition. Robin mirrored his stance with her legs planted. "He tries every now and then—and completely strikes out. It's why he hates the uniform so much; he thinks it ruins his chance with customers."

"Well there's his problem," Phil lifted his curls to the other side of his head, where they locked together to stay off his face. "You can't be picking up lollipop gals in an ice cream parlor. They either don't know a good time, or will run from a good time. They spook easy. Steve's aiming too low."

Robin was caught by genuine laughter. "It's cute that you esteem him so high."

Phil shook his head with some kind of mutual understanding. "We gotta gas each other up in this white bread, nightmare of a town. These people are slowly opening their eyes, but the folks who know what's good still have to travel out of town for it. Now tell me straight: Steve *isn't*, right?"

Robin slid the tip of her tongue between her teeth, both deliberating on the answer and whether Phil deserved it. "I don't think even he knows the answer to that yet."

Phil's brows lifted. "Yet?"

Robin tipped her head from side to side. "He's gotten distracted lately. I'm not wholly convinced he didn't come into work with a spectacular hickey on his neck. And the way he keeps wearing stuff around his neck...well...speaks for itself, doesn't it?"

Phil's cheeky smile melted into melodramatic lament. "Don't say that! I'm jealous and thrilled for him and I hate that. Who is it—?"

“Phil!”

They peered down the rectangular room at Steve holding the cat in one hand and a bottle in the other. “You got any shampoo that *won’t* fumigate this cat’s lungs? Come on!”

Phil gave Robin a look, which she took with a smile as he sauntered behind the partition to help Steve bathe the cat—

“I’m surprised she hasn’t smacked you yet. Is it actually going well?”

Phil stared at him before leveling a hand on the sink. “Did you just bring me back here to get me away from your colleague?”

Steve smiled as he snapped the bottle open and handed him the cat. “I got her here, didn’t I? Don’t play all your cards in one go. Hold the head away from the water. I gotta soak her neck. Fleas keep bouncing all over her face.”

“Whose side are you on?” Phil sighed, earning a lasting glance from Steve.

“Are you dying or something? What was that?”

“Oh, it’s nights like this we should be in the city. Muggy nights with electric stars as you walk to a club. I think it’s healthy to get no sleep every once and a while. When were you last in Chicago?”

Steve absorbed that with wide eyes before he admitted, “A weekend trip in middle school, I think. I’d love to get sleep tonight, but I gotta get this one to an animal hospital.”

Some of the grime wasn’t coming off, and Steve didn’t want to risk hurting the cat in the effort to clean it off. Phil moved a fine-toothed comb carefully over the cat’s face until he had to just pick the bugs off one by one. After a quick towel dry, he moved a hairdryer around the cat.

“Keep the towel for safety. Just give it back to me on your next shift.”

Steve lifted the bundle to his chest like a baby. “Thanks, Phil. You’re awesome.”



“Uh huh, Sir Hero. Just don’t tell me where you got those highlights and we won’t have to fight about it.”

Outside the mall, Robin offered, “I’ll give you directions.”

Steve shifted the backpack strap on his shoulder and fished for his keys in one of the exterior pockets. “That’d be great—Wait, what are you doing?”

Robin stood by the passenger door of his car. “Coming with you. You don’t know anything about cats, and someone at the hospital should know me. You won’t have to wait if I’m with you.”

He sighed as he unlocked his door and reached across the seats to unlock hers. “This is so not how I expected to spend the night.”

At least they had the dead of night to clear the roads. An hour later, and three music debates later, Steve pulled between the faded paint lines of the hospital parking lot. He reached into the back seat for his grey jacket to go over his Scoops uniform, and locked the car while Robin carried the cat. True to her word, the person manning the front desk knew her on sight and took the bundle off their hands.

“I’ll still need you to fill these out,” he said with clipboard in hand. “Can’t totally get out of paperwork.”

“Yeah, sure,” Steve accepted, and went to sit in the Dalmatian-themed waiting room. The spots were a bit much, but the painted murals on the cinderblock walls were cute. “What do I put for half of these? The cat’s a stray. She doesn’t have medical records. Birthday?”

“Just give her a name and they can determine the age,” Robin said from where she stood at the children’s table.

She flipped through one of the storybooks until Steve asked, “What sort of thing do you name a cat?”

“Whatever you want. Since you found her at work, maybe Captain Sorbet.”

“No way. I’m not using one of those stupid, crazy cat lady names.”

“Okay, judgy. What do you want to name her, then?”

Steve thought back to the cat sleeping on Robin’s lap, and the white towel over the tall, tabby-striped ears...

Robin watched him scrawl something down, but didn’t push it as the desk manager returned. “Alrighty. Good news and bad. The bad, is the little one should stay here for the night. She’s dehydrated, malnourished, and needs to get fluids. The good news, is you found her in time to save the eye, and it looks like it’s only the eye. Kittens this young are real susceptible to respiratory infections. She’ll pull through.”

“Overnight?” Steve repeated beside Robin. “How much is that going to cost?”

“Let me type out the estimate and we can talk numbers. Are you done with this?”

He tapped the neon green clipboard. Steve mumbled, “Uh, yeah, but I didn’t know much to fill in.”

“It’s really just your contact information we need, Mr....Harrington,” he read. “If you’re here with Robin then you’re from Hawkins too? It’s real good of you to drive all the way out here at such an hour.”

Steve let his weight sag on the counter. “All we had was a frozen fish sandwich to feed her, so...it’s the least I could do.”

Robin held her face on the counter during their discussion, but before the manager took the clipboard, she read: *Leia Harrington*.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter title doesn't match such a wholesome chapter LOL but that cat's going to save lives, just you wait.

## 9. Try Me

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I don’t wanna drive all the way back to the mall,” Steve said as he unlocked his front doors. The muggy night behind him was turning into a muggy morning that he just wanted to shower off and sleep through. “S’not like your car’s going anywhere. You can have my room since I’ve got my own bathroom. I’ll crash on the couch—mom. What are you doing awake?”

Mrs. Harrington’s momentum from the kitchen brought her to a swaying stop in the foyer. “I’ve slept and it’s a new day. The sun’s rising. What’ve you guys been distracted with?”

Her gaze alighted onto Robin, who stepped forward to shake her hand. “Hi, Mrs. Harrington. I’m Robin. I work with Steve. Sorry to crash your place like this.”

“Nice to meet you, dear, and I don’t care about that. Better safe than who knows where. Are you two going to tell me what’s kept you up all night or is it uncouth for a parent’s ears?”

Robin laughed nervously while Steve picked up, “I found a cat outside the mall and it was in bad shape. We had to drive to the animal hospital in the next county over. Robin was nice enough to help me. I’ve got the battle wounds to prove it.”

He pivoted his leg so his bloody sock was visible. His mother’s skepticism faded as she said, “Be sure to wash that before you sleep. Where is the cat now?”

“It’s staying overnight for treatment,” Robin answered. “She was super dehydrated.”

“And where is this cat going once that’s finished?”

“My mom used to foster cats. I doubt she’ll mind taking in another.”

“Good,” she chimed, satisfied. “You can sleep in my office. That way you both have beds, and the bathroom is just across the hall. Steve

will show you. Now get some rest before your next shift.”

“We’re off tomor—today, I guess,” Robin said.

“Thank the Starcourt gods,” Steve moaned on his way up the stairs.  
“Thanks, mom.”

He distantly heard the sounds of his mother leaving for work, and Robin in the nearby bathroom before he turned his shower on. He made quick work of washing the inch of humidity and grime off his body before pulling a t-shirt over his head. While adjusting the waistband of his night shorts, he opened the cabinet under the sink...

“Ah, man,” he cursed mildly, shaking his empty hydrogen peroxide container. He glanced behind him at the soap on his shower shelf but decided against it. Peroxide would tingle but it wouldn’t burn like a bitch.

He draped a towel over his neck before he went to knock on Robin’s bathroom door. “Hey, you decent? I need something.”

“Yeah, but—hey!” she erupted when he opened the door. This involved nudging the door against her shoulder to move her out of the way of the sink. “What the hell? It may be your bathroom but I’m still a female guest.”

“If I’d known you’d take half an hour removing lipstick, I would’ve given you the makeup remover under my sink. I need the peroxide, calm down.”

That gave Robin pause. “Dare I ask why you have makeup remover?”

Steve unscrewed the bottle and held a cotton ball over the opening while he turned it upside-down. “It was my ex’s, obviously, but it’s still usable. It’s weirdly good at getting mulch and caulk out from under fingernails.”

“Huh,” she chirped, contemplating that while he stepped onto the toilet lid and dabbed...nothing.

Steve’s pause made her tilt her body to see a clean, unblemished shin and ankle. “It was your other leg, dingus.”

But Steve stared a little too long, inducing her to tilt the other way to see his other...totally fine ankle.

"You're right," he laughed breathily, rotating to leave the bathroom. "I'll just take this back to my room—"

"Wait." Steve walked into her arm, splashing peroxide on himself while she said, "Your sock was totally red and then brown, like, you were *bleeding*. It wasn't a stain. Where are the scratches?"

He shrugged her hand off. "I must've misplaced them. It's fine."

He succeeded in making her mull over that before she rushed after him. "You can't misplace injuries. Steve—*wow*."

He held up a finger against her blunt gaze wandering his room. "Keep all opinions to yourself."

"No way," she laughed. "*Wow!*"

"*Stop.*"

"Look, no offense to your mom, but what god-awful home décor magazine did this room walk out of?"

"You know what? No band geeks allowed. I don't want whatever koodies you blow through your trumpets fogging up my room."

Steve tried to wave her out with his uniform shirt he'd taken off the bed. Robin held her hips while her weight sagged to one side. "You know what you need? Plants."

A laugh spewed unbidden from his mouth as he dumped his clothes in the laundry basket. "What? You're messing with me."

"No," she chimed. "All this monochromatic, soulless man-energy in here could really liven up with some green. Green's a safe color for you, right?"

Steve sighed, exhausted as he slouched to face her. "Robin, just say what you mean, please."

"I'm saying more teenagers have neon decals, pop star posters, and glow in the dark stars on their walls than you've got porn mags crammed under the mattress."

"I've got a secret drawer, thank you very much. Classy. Like 007."

Robin's cheeks ballooned with her snort. "Really? You actually have a secret compartment?"

A shy but cocky smile lifted Steve's lips. "Yeah—well, the whole top actually came off and I had this, sort of, flat tray. It fit right in without disturbing the drawer underneath it and everything."

"Hm." The corners of her mouth turned down, impressed. "Surprisingly resourceful. But what I mean is that guys are allowed to have color in their rooms. Nobody who matters is going to call you a pussy just because you acknowledge the color spectrum and put a little bit of it on your walls."

"I know that," he said after a moment of thought. He gave the room a once over. "I never thought I needed to change it. It's just a place to crash, you know?"

Robin's brows tilted in a disappointed way before she started out of the room. "Well that's sad as hell. Find those injuries you misplaced, dummy, and then maybe we'll test the waters of the garden center. Don't talk to me for at least five hours, though."

"Make it six," he agreed, shutting the door behind her. Retreating back to his own bathroom, however, he lifted his leg all the way for his foot to rest in the sink. The yellow lighting definitely couldn't hide the fact that there were no scratch marks.

*They heal fast too.*

His gaze shot up to look at himself throwing the towel off his neck. Holding his hair back, he swiveled left and right, seeing how one side of his throat had healed without a scar—not even a hint of discoloration—but the other definitely sported the double-whammy Billy had left him with.

Steve frowned before he could only shake his head and sigh, "I don't

understand.”

“Don’t understand what?” Robin asked.

“JESUS—FUCK!” Steve barely caught himself on the counter, trapped as he was with a foot in the sink.

“What are you doing?” She stood in the doorway, amused and perplexed while he otherwise wrangled his leg back down.

“What are *you* doing? Get out!”

Robin held her hands out and said measuredly, “I just came to get the makeup remover. My lips chap and split if I don’t remove... properly... Oh my god.”

Steve’s hand tried and failed to fly up and cover his neck by seemingly fixing his hair. “What?” He rotated, swiping the towel off the floor—

“What do you mean *what*? Your neck has holes in it!”

He blocked her hands from reaching for his shoulders. “Don’t worry about it! It’s fine! Everything’s fine!”

“Steve!”

“*What*, Robin? *What*?” He faced her with pressed lips and wide eyes, daring her to say it.

“Why the hell do those look like vampire bites? What weird shit is Billy into?”

Steve stood frozen, gaping at her. Then, “How’d you know it’s Billy?”

“*Hello*? The giant strawberry on your neck the same day *he* of all people shows up at work? I thought it was a weird, epidermal hickey infection you got from him!”

Steve gestured wildly. “I’m not with—We are *not*—” He caught the doomed peroxide bottle before it crashed to the floor. “Jesus, I would sooner date *Phil* than Billy!”

“He’ll love hearing that. Until then, explain!”

“I don’t want to. It’s my stupid business.” Steve once and for all screwed the lid onto the bottle. After trading it for the makeup remover under the sink, he kicked the cabinet door shut and planted the bases of his palms on the counter, slouching.

“Steve...” she uttered steadily, “are you okay?”

He peeked at her, visibly vacant of understanding. Robin elaborated, “Are you being forced into something you don’t want?”

His features opened and he let his head hang. He sighed heavily, “No. I agreed to this.”

“Are you sure?”

His head lifted with his deep inhale. “Look, Billy’s a lot, but...but I’ve got a lot...our ‘lots’ balance, I guess.”

“Steve,” she leaned her hip against the counter, “we spend anywhere between four to eighteen hours together on a daily basis. I wouldn’t call us friends but I also thought I’d sooner vomit rabbits than be in your house, let alone bedroom. There are holes in your neck. I’m—”

He looked at her, waiting for the end of that. Her eyes darted between him and the sink, caught. “What?” he pushed softly.

She moved her weight from one foot to the other and back. “I don’t know. Liable? If you’re going to keel over, I ought to know and why. And you owe me a bandana. I’ll settle for information.”

Steve absorbed that and a laugh turned his head back to the mirror. “Hey, every time Billy’s knocked me over I’ve gotten back up. Don’t worry about me.”

“Goddamn it, Steve, I care, all right? So tell me,” she pleaded. The hum of the lights is loud in the silence. Between his tapping fingers, roaming eyes, and the bob of his adam’s apple, she knew him to be considering something.

“You’re never going to believe it,” he said weakly, shaking his head.



The sound is...different. Not very Steve Harrington at all. Like a mixture of tired, scared, and annoyed.

“Try me.”

“You know,” he sighed, standing up straight to lean his own hip against the counter and face her. “He might actually kill me for telling you.”

“All the more reason for me to know. You can’t be at the mercy of a psychopath.”

“He’s not a psychopath.”

“The mullet begs to differ.”

The laugh is genuine this time, rocking his shoulders as a hand lifted to catch his snort. “Robin, I’m serious. This can’t leave this room.”

“Fine. Until I need to keep you from being an idiot.”

“No, see, that’s impossible.”

“My god, we actually agree. Spill already.”

Steve looked at her without really seeing her, still thinking. Then his eyes closed, and he just stood there, locked in a battle with himself before he turned his head away. He didn’t need to look at her to deal with her laughter.

“The bites are real. Billy’s a vampire.”

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

This is me, purely being a little shit because I've had this written for MONTHS, but I originally had it being apart of the longer chapter after this, but.....have a short chapter with a cheeky cliff hanger instead :)

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## 10. Complex

Steve hugged one of his pillows to his chest while Robin used another to cushion her back against his headboard. They sat in contemplative silence—at least, Robin did. Steve’s thumbs fiddled over the fabric, waiting.

So much for sleep.

He looked up when Robin voiced, “You said his teeth extend?”

“Uh. Yeah, like...like cat claws. They kinda...slide out when he needs them.”

Robin really didn’t want to believe him. It was written on her face, in her voice, singing in her silence, and firmly resting in her crossed arms. But the truth remained on Steve’s neck.

“And you said he helps you sleep?”

Steve closed his eyes for a long exhalation. “There’s something in his teeth that makes me...drowsy. Understatement on the drowsy.”

“How are you so sure he isn’t just taking enough to make you pass out?”

Steve nibbled on his lip and shook his head. “I don’t think he actually takes that much. I mean, how much *can* he take in just a minute or two? I never wake up in a puddle of my own blood.”

“Why do you have trouble sleeping in the first place?”

“That’s another story for another day,” he dodged.

Robin’s arms unlocked and crossed again. “But he walks around in the day time.”

“He’s a freaking lifeguard at the community pool.” Steve’s eyes rolled all the way to the window. “Authors and Hollywood don’t know shit, apparently.”

Robin pushed her bottom lip up. “So...he’ll be working between nine and three-ish?”

Steve looked at her. “First of all, why? And secondly, how do you know that?”

“His shifts always alternate with Heather Holloway,” she waved aside while picking at her nail polish.

“I didn’t know you were friends with Heather.”

Robin perked up from her thoughts. “Hm? I’m not.”

Steve’s features flattened. “Then how do you kno—”

“We should go to the pool today. Do some surveillance.”

He stared at her for a moment before pointing out his window. “Have you looked outside? There’s no point in me going to the community pool. He’s going to know something’s up. And what even is there to see?”

She surprised him by throwing her weight onto her knees to face him. “Exactly! We don’t know if something obvious is going on, but since *we do* know, we might be able to see it!”

Steve tried to smile but it came out wonky. “I don’t get it? How does this get me out of being suspicious? Billy’s not dumb.”

“I can be your excuse. He won’t know I’ve been here or that we drove together—in fact! We can get my car on the way!”

“Oh, I-I—” he tried, “I’d really just rather sleep—”

“Get up! It’s already seven-thirty and we can peruse plants while we’re at it.”

“This isn’t your room!” he yelled after her.

“Garden center opens in half an hour!” she finished from the hallway.

Steve trudged his way downstairs since, without her car, he couldn’t

hope that she would just leave if she found him passed out. Robin had certainly made herself at home by finding the skillet and throwing vegetables he didn't even know they had into scrambled eggs. She turned around to Steve successfully bending his leg against the counter in pigeon pose. "What is with you and putting your legs in high places?"

"Look and learn," he shushed, "because I've realized how much Scoops is killing me by having us stand all day. My mom does these stretches every morning, and it's embarrassing that she's more fit than me now."

"Hm. Right on," she appraised, snapping open a ketchup bottle and sliding his plate toward him.

When she moved to set the bottle down, he waved his hand, "Nah nah—over here."

She giggled and squeezed ketchup over his omelet too. "You could be productive and make us coffee."

He hummed a negative sound until his mouth was free. "I'm not allowed to use it."

"Really? Why?"

He shook his head with a gesturing fork. "I pushed the coffee grinds too hard in the filter or something. It kind of exploded. Scalding hot water everywhere."

Steve could tell she was holding back laughter, but she settled with a simple, "Got it," and they finished breakfast. Going to a pool involved loaning her one of his t-shirts and swimming trunks, though. "Your taste in swimwear is almost as bad as our uniforms."

Steve frowned at the coral shorts with black lightning bolts across it. He thought it looked fine with the green t-shirt, but threatened, "You're free to stay sea-ready."

"Nope," she chimed.

Steve heaved a sigh when he landed once more in his driver's seat.

"You good?" Robin asked beside him.

"S'not my first all nighter," he assured, turning the key in the ignition. Finding one of his half-consumed bottles of water, he drained it and willed his overworked heart to calm down. After stopping by the mall, he followed Robin to the damn garden center, and by then the sun was already threatening a sweltering day.

"A rubber tree. You'll definitely want one of those," she declared while lifting the thing into a cart. "Doesn't need a lot of light, and it'll grow to cover more of your wall."

Steve unwillingly pushed the cart along the aisles inside the chain link fenced area. He didn't see the need to treat plants like a dog kennel, but then he asked the cashier to repeat the sum back to him. "Forty-*what*? For two plants?"

"Green for green, Steve, come on," Robin insisted. Steve glared at her, really unsure why the hell he had let her take him this far. Even more unsure why he parted with the money when there was a cat to pay for later.

"Did you see the orchids?" the cashier prompted. Always trying to make a last minute sale. "They're half off since they're almost out of season."

Steve didn't know what an orchid was until he followed the hand gesturing to long stalks and open petals—

"Seen 'em too many times, thanks," he muttered, side-eyeing the bright little demogorgon face bobbing with the wind from a nearby fan.

"Okay..." the cashier mumbled. Steve met Robin's wondering gaze but they had an agenda which didn't include orchids, and she stuck to it.

"Be sure to park in the shade," she ordered as he pulled into the pool lot, parking in the free space diagonally from her. "Do you have anything worth stealing in there?"

"Not unless a homeless person needs deodorant."

“Good. Leave the windows cracked.”

“Yeah. Hate for fifty dollars’ worth of leaves to die,” he said flatly.

“Shut up. You’ll thank me.” She threw a towel at him. “They won’t let you in the water with the bandages.”

He wrapped it around his neck like a scarf. “Not to sound like an aristocratic douche, but I’ll swim in my own pool without the whole town’s sweat and pee, thanks.”

“Fair,” she admitted, and led the march into the already busy community pool. There was some nonsense about membership identification, which Robin supplied and used one of her “guest passes” to allow Steve admittance.

“Kendra, you’ve known us since first grade,” Steve remarked.

She shrugged, utterly bored while she chewed her gum and tossed her box braids over her shoulder. “Rules.”

He leaned against the counter while Robin handled it, his eyes roaming the parking lot. What the blue Camaro lacked in eye-catching qualities, it made up for in noise, but neither were present.

“He’s not here,” Steve murmured on their way through the cinderblock tunnel.

“He’ll be here.”

“How do you know?”

Robin pointed, and Steve took a moment to realize the line of primping women were the same moms he’d seen taking pictures outside of prom limousines and pta meetings. Among them, stood Mrs. Wheeler laying down a towel across her seat. “Jesus Christ.”

“It’s like watching wildebeests or something, isn’t it?” Robin bumped his arm to make him pay attention to the flow of the crowd. She found two lounges under an umbrella that wasn’t taken—at least, after the kid scrambled with one look from Robin.

“You’re a charmer.”

“We’ve all done the hazing of being a snotty kid before,” she declared upon landing. “Their time for teenage liberties will come.”

Steve eased himself down, adjusting the towel so the top corners covered his shoulders. “You’re so confident, but I don’t see him anywhere.”

“The lifeguards are scheduled between nine and three, but they alternate during that time. About two hours a-piece.”

*“Two hours?”*

“Shush. The only place you gotta be is the animal clinic, and Leia probably won’t be ready for another couple of days anyway.”

Steve pressed circles over his eyes. “I’m never saving up for anything.”

“I’ll talk to my mom. Maybe she’ll cover half of it.”

“I sure as hell hope so!” he erupted. “She’s the one taking her.”

“Calm down. How often do you actually sit back for some sun anyways? I bet you sleep most of your time off.”

“I’m calm,” he defended, surveying the rest of the pool area. To his surprise, he recognized some of his neighbors who had their own pools. He could see the appeal, socializing with the whole town, despite the gross watering hole in the middle of it all. He might be inclined to do so too, if the residing lifeguard hadn’t broken a plate on his face a few months ago. Steve wasn’t the type to hold a grudge for too long, and that night at the Byers’ felt like a year ago, but Steve didn’t trust Billy to be particularly kind to him even though he was dinner every so often.

“He needs to show up sooner than two hours, or else I’m passing out.”

“Well look at that,” she sang. “Your wish is his command.”

“What?” Steve chirped, sitting up to follow her eyes. All the moms were like synchronized swimmers, pointing themselves at the changing rooms...

Steve and Robin glanced at each other, a mutual mixture of humor, disgust, and bewilderment shared between them as Billy sauntered over the concrete.

“The prime bull makes his appearance,” Robin narrated in a quiet, velvet tone. Steve snorted into his hand, falling back across his chair. “Hey, you think that’s a side-effect?”

“Huh?” he said, coming out of his giggles.

“Do you think he’s bitten all of them? You’re you, so you might be dingus enough to not succumb to whatever is pulling all of those women to Billy. But they’re definitely acting like puppets on strings.”

“First of all, I bought plants for you, so be nice to me. Secondly, no, there’s no way of knowing. Billy hasn’t bitten Mrs. Wheeler yet, so I don’t know what their deal is. Maybe old farts should stop joking about lusty housewives, because there seems to be a real epidemic over there.”

Robin laughed to herself as they could only stare at Billy making eyes at said Wheeler before climbing atop his lofty chair. “How are you so sure he hasn’t bitten her?”

“He said as much a little while ago. A while ago,” Steve admitted, chewing his lip. He didn’t like the way Nancy’s mom looked flustered and absolutely preened at having Billy speak to her. “Do any of those moms ever...you know, take breaks from coming here? For a few days?”

“I’m not here often enough to know,” Robin admitted, but caught on, “Although, it doesn’t seem like the smartest grocery shopping; if all the produce has nowhere to hide a bite mark.”

“Billy said they heal fast. Faster than I do.”

The stray pieces of Robin’s bun on top of her head moved around her face when she turned to him. “How fast?”



Steve's features opened while he shrugged. "I don't know. So far, I take a few days to a week to be fully bite-less. Once Billy saw that I react differently, he seemed pretty spooked about it. Which makes me think one of those women wouldn't be noticed if she had to take a day or two off from the pool."

"Why do they heal fast but you look like I could toast bread on your neck?"

He gave her an annoyed, albeit patient look over the rims of his sunglasses. "I don't know. We're still figuring that out."

"Hmm," Robin hummed contemplatively. "Man, I wish you could just pick his brain apart."

"Okay, serial killer, calm down."

She looked at him. "You're not the least bit curious about how it all works?"

"How what all works?"

"That's just it! We don't know! He could be capable of anything."

"He's capable of being obnoxious." Steve sat a little lower on his lounge, watching the goddamn Adonis on his throne. "Shape-shifting and talking to wolves is the only interesting thing I'd want to know."

Robin lifted her brows at him, appraising. "You actually listened to those *Dracula* lectures."

"You act like I can't read."

"I know you can read. I also know you left that book wedged under the bar connecting our seats to our desks."

"It was loose and kept squeaking. And I didn't like how it was written."

Robin laughed hard enough to draw her knees up a little, but Steve hardly knew why. "Go ahead, critic, what's wrong with Stoker's classic?"

He shifted uncomfortably, knowing this was a trap. “There’s nothing *wrong* with it, per say. I just don’t like the format. One second we’re in a diary, the next we’re reading a newspaper, and half of everybody is getting drugged on Dracula juice—” He shook his head. “I couldn’t follow it.”

“Congratulations,” she remarked, but he waited for the shoe to drop, “that’s *unreliable narrator* at work.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means the narrator’s human and can get stuff wrong, or not know everything, therefore *we* don’t know everything.”

“Then they shouldn’t be the narrator!”

She giggled again and time began to pass almost easily. It was oddly comforting, talking to Robin about a book Steve achieved a B- on. “Why am I learning more about this guy now than I ever did in that class?”

“Probably because the teacher sounded halfway between pneumonia and a nap—oh boy.”

“Oh what?” Steve followed the direction of her sunglasses. His jaw slowly went slack. “Is she really...?”

“Yyyyep,” Robin drawled like she was waiting to be wrong. But nope: Mrs. Wheeler strolled right past Billy’s chair and dove into the water. Robin and Steve could only watch the laps she made and Billy’s attention becoming less and less discrete. Eventually Robin said, “Honestly, I’m sort of impressed. She wears that kind of makeup and still goes swimming, *and* it actually stays on—Steve?”

Steve could not quite define what made him shoot to his feet and navigate around the pool like an eel through coral. He never really could put a name to his split decisions apart from *idiot with a faulty hero complex*.

But whatever Billy’s saying makes Mrs. Wheeler drop her towel. Billy picks it up for her.

Nancy and Mike really didn't need their mom exploring her own complex at the public pool. Sure, that's it.

Steve rounded the corner and began to hear snippets of conversation. "...think you taught adults."

"Well, I offer more, uh...advanced lessons to select clientele—"

Neither of them noticed Steve striding up behind Billy, so when he rammed his shoulder right into Billy, he knocked him so hard they both stumbled into Mrs. Wheeler. "Woah! Jesus, sorry! Oh, I'll get that, Mrs. Wheeler."

He snapped up with her towel, claiming her attention that now flicked between both he and Billy. "Steve! Oh...goodness, I feel like I haven't seen you in so long. How are you?"

"I'm good! Well, you know, I've had a pain in my neck lately, but I'm good. How's Nancy?"

It wasn't exactly the question he meant to put forward, but it had the desired effect: Mrs. Wheeler blinked with an epiphany and put the towel around her shoulders while she replied, "She's good, from what little I can tell. She's so rarely in the house. You teens always have so many places to be."

Steve matched her smile with, "Not for long for me. My next birthday is a new decade."

Her smile fell but her politeness prompted, "I'm so sorry we missed your birthday this year."

"Nah," he waved aside, "I get it. I don't need a birthday bash to still have the perks of being older than everybody else."

He looked at Billy, then, whose blue eyes glowed in the middle of his tan. His smile was so strained, Steve considered his work done. Billy crooned quietly, a warning, "I didn't know you were nineteen."

"I'm one of those people who looks younger." He nodded and turned back to Mrs. Wheeler. "Not like Billy, here. Freshly eighteen and ready to eat your heart out."

Billy ground his jaw and Mrs. Wheeler avoided eye contact. Billy observed her brief, wide-eyed stare at the concrete and felt the crush of panic inside her at realizing Billy was younger than her daughter's ex. *No! No no no, Steve Fucking Harrington—*

“Jonathan and I are on good terms, though,” said Harrington continued. “You’re more likely to see him before me. Tell him and Nance I said hi. And whatever Holly wants from Scoops Ahoy is on me.”

Mrs. Wheeler smiled like nothing was wrong. She began to move around him and Billy to return to her seat. “That’s very sweet of you, Steve. I appreciate it.”

“Sure thing,” he grinned.

“Thanks again, Billy.”

Billy pivoted to reply, “Of course, Mrs. Wheeler—”

Steve shoved him right into the pool. Kids shrieked with stunned vengeance while Steve began to straight-leg power walk around the pool before it turned into an outright run. He glanced back at Billy whipping his hair off his face and finding him. Robin watched it all with her jaw in her lap.

“WE GOTTA GO, BUCKLEY!” he exclaimed with the biggest, gleeful smile on his face. She yanked both of their towels off their seats and fell in step with him out of the public pool.

“You just got me banned for life.”

“I’m gonna be murdered before my next shift,” he snickered.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

And neither Billy nor Steve will ever know how he saved Billy's life that day~

[Twitter~](#)  
[Tumblr~](#)

## 11. Lines

Billy would never admit—like, in a million years, never admit—to the fact that Harrington had balls. That stupid grin on his face as he scampered out of the public pool would have made Billy laugh his head off if it weren't for half the town being an audience. And because Steve had thoroughly wrecked *weeks* of slow pursuit on Karen Wheeler. She was the loyal type. Billy had to entice her slowly, at her own snail's pace. But it would be worth it, because she'd be a loyal meal for as many weeks afterward.

Until Steve happened.

So instead of cruising his way to a motel to feast on a long-deserved meal, Billy pulled alongside the curb outside the Harrington's abode. Steve's car was there. Billy hadn't decided how to go about his revenge, but he was sure Steve would inspire him with a shit-eating smirk or something.

Because Steve did...surprise him. Sometimes. A fact Billy was going to have to deal with at some point.

As for now, he stood out of his car, eyeing the tall house—

He sniffed and turned toward the panel over his gas cap. Neither were open but knew he smelled gasoline. He checked the panel and cap before scouring the asphalt, even getting down on his knees to see if something was leaking under the car. The summer evening didn't give him a whole lot to see by, but he figured out a long time ago that he could see in the dark a hell of a lot better than anybody else.

Deciding his sapphire steed was in the clear, Billy climbed back to his feet, straightening his white, lifeguard emblazoned, t-shirt in the process...

He looked up at the house, but it wasn't Steve's. Only one level, no fancy red double-doors, and the windows flashed like a rave... Something about it struck Billy—familiarity, disdain, chagrin—but most prominently, *fear*.

It was Billy's confusion that made him realize he stood neck deep in a memory. The confusion sat closer than the fear, like his own shirt beneath a borrowed jacket. The out of body disorientation made him look around—

And just like that, he stood once more in the luxury neighborhood of Hawkins, Indiana. Billy tried to keep his eyes open even while he rubbed circles over them. He didn't want to see flashing lights under his eyelids. Those were becoming far too common, along with...the other details. The sci-fi details he didn't care to unpack because whatever the hell Steve must've watched as a kid came with a fuck load of fear and adrenaline that made Billy sick. He avoided diving into Steve's brain like he usually did with his meals because whatever had traumatized the guy so far that he carried these memories in his blood, Billy didn't want to touch it.

Besides, he still wasn't one hundred percent on it being Steve. It had to be Steve. These memory flashes only started after Billy made the mistake of entangling himself with Harrington. But asking Steve meant that he had to tell him about this...ability.

So, no. He wouldn't ask.

Billy scrubbed his hands over his face and glanced down the street as he crossed it. Hell, maybe he was just on his own one-way ticket to insanity. It couldn't be right, constantly digesting people's memories —

Mrs. Harrington opened the door.

Billy's smile was easy to dish out. "Good evening, Mrs. Harrington."

"Hi, Billy," she returned...a little indifferently. No spark of flirtation and swirl in the stomach came from this one. "Steve's not here."

Billy made his smile fade slowly, like he'd meant it and was too suave to let things bother him. "Is he okay? His car's here."

That hadn't been what Billy meant to say, but it passed the mom test.

"He's out of town picking something up with one of his coworkers. He should be on his way back, though. You're welcome to wait by

the pool or in his room.”

Billy’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “I’d love to.”

Sauntering behind her through the foyer and past the stairs, he asked, “Mind if I get a drink?”

Mrs. Harrington glanced back at him on her way to somewhere else in the house. “Help yourself from the fridge. I’m sure you’ve been scalding all day.”

“Thank you very much.”

He could feel her warmth move through the house as easily as seeing her silhouette moving along backlit curtains. Did he dare? The answer is an easy yes, but the matter of Steve’s condition complicated things. Billy had yet to understand why Steve glowed like red hot metal from his venom. Was it genetic? If Billy took a sip and Mrs. Harrington remained fully cognizant afterward...Billy didn’t know if he wanted to deal with that.

Then again...Steve retained his memories. Steve managed to push through the mental fog to talk to him during feedings. Steve had a unique immunity. Partial immunity at least. Billy had yet to lay all of his abilities on Steve, but if precedent showed anything, Steve had an edge, albeit a tiny one.

He could test Mrs. Harrington’s edge. As gently as grazing his thumb sideways over a knife.

Billy leaned back against the kitchen counter, eyes locking on her silhouette through the walls. He didn’t do this often, but it came as naturally as quickening a stride into a run. His mind reached out to her, enveloped her like an abstract veil. He knew he had her when his own mind went a little numb...ultra relaxed. Keeping his thoughts clear, he gently tugged her in the direction of the kitchen.

Mrs. Harrington entered and walked by him without noticing or addressing him. Billy scanned her body. He felt no fear or anxiety rippling from her. Not a single drop of turbulent emotion.

He reached around her for her hand and paused. Still no reaction.

She might as well have been sleepwalking. Billy extended a fang, and pulled the pad of her thumb underneath it. He sucked the large drops welling out of her finger, but a moment later, her skin closed with just a richly pink scar that was already fading.

Billy hummed to himself, and without further ado, held her shoulders while he bit into her neck.

For a woman with everything, she deflated as if she were Atlas holding up the world. Billy quickly caught her around the waist to hold her up, withdrawing his fangs so he did not tear more of her flesh. Much like Steve, she didn't react quite the same as his other meals. She just...relaxed. Sure, tingles and swirls of lust moved through her, but only as a side effect. Billy's venom had an uncanny element of honesty to it; it brought out the foremost thing in a person's brain. He'd gotten some *unique* confessions in the middle of feedings, and the world was so goddamn closeted that a lot of those confessions were sexual.

But Steve wanted sleep. And that apple didn't fall far from his mother.

Billy took what he could until it became unavoidable that Mrs. Harrington was buckling. He scooped her legs up, jostling her a little to get a better grip, and carried her to the living room couch. Plucking a tissue out of the box on the coffee table, he cleaned up her neck and collarbone. There was nothing he could do for the smear inside her lilac button-up without removing it, and he wasn't about to go under a woman's shirt who didn't want him there.

He no longer saw much of a need to wait around for Steve. Billy wasn't the kind to gloat, so he stayed another moment to make sure Mrs. Harrington was breathing easily, and rounded out of the living room—

And had his heart slam against his spine. "*Jesus—Steve.*"

The guy was setting something on the stairs, and moved to unzip his jacket before he decided otherwise. Billy moved a finger under his nose and opened the hand to make sure his car keys were in it as he said, "You sure move quiet when it suits you."



Steve's eyes were on him while he set his own keys on the furniture against the wall. "The door was unlocked," he said measuredly.

Billy sniffed. "Well. Congratulations, you took long enough that I actually ate the sandwich your mom offered."

"Uh huh."

Steve moved out of the way for Billy to reach the door. "And that's all?"

He didn't turn around as his hand grasped one of the knobs. "That's all, Harrington. Till next time."

The balmy night wrapped around him as he stepped out of the house, leaving a wake of humidity in the foyer as Steve rushed quiet steps around the corner that Billy had come from.

Billy stepped off the Harringtons' lawn and into the street when he heard the door open behind him. "Hey, Billy! Hey, about today..."

He sighed, annoyed. "I told you, you're off the hook—"

He rotated in time for the large end of a baseball bat to land against his sternum like a javelin. It landed on the asphalt with its familiar wooden clatter as Billy otherwise landed on his ass, coughing air back into his lungs. Steve was on him, kicking away the bat away while he held another one in his hands. Billy's eyes widened, recognizing the nails.

"I gave you *one* line. One line to not cross! And you just sprint right over it!"

Steve kicked Billy's hand, sending his car keys over the road. He looked at the Camaro, spinning the bat in his hand with a sharp flick of his wrist, as if considering slashing the tires.

He didn't. Steve Harrington played bad but never went all the way.

Instead he picked up his other bat without nails, his eyes making sure Billy stayed put. "Stay away from my mom. And go fuck yourself."

## Notes for the Chapter:

A shorter chapter, but I know some biggie things are coming in the next one so~ thank you all for bearing with my slow updates!

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## 12. Emily and Isabelle

### Notes for the Chapter:

Heads up: miscarriage is mentioned briefly in this chapter, but it might be uncomfortable for some readers.

April is my Harringrove anniversary! Dracula has a Mullet was the first Harringrove story I started writing/uploading on April 7th, 2020. I wanted to upload on the day, but by the time I remembered, it was already the 10th haha and life has gotten away from me until now.

I'm sorry chapters come so slowly, but I am extremely fond of this story and always think about it.

Never in his life would Steve have predicted that he'd ever put his mother to bed like a designated driver after a party.

“Easy...easy... Mom, I’m putting you down.”

Mrs. Harrington was hardly coherent enough to appreciate her son’s efforts. Steve wondered if he’d been like this the first time: a passed out deadweight for Billy to get into his car to drive him home. What must that have been like? Going between Steve and Alex O’Neil’s house to manage the BMW, Camaro, and one out-of-commission Steve in order to make sure Steve was—for the most part—home, as well as to get home himself? It’s not like Billy could’ve asked for someone’s help at the party if everyone was sloppy drunk and Steve was sporting an extremely visible sore on his neck. But it seemed like a lot of work the asshole was unlikely to do alone.

*At least he got me home somehow, I guess,* Steve recollected as he caught his mother’s head before she injured her neck. By her head and shoulders, he guided her body down onto the daybed in her office. She slept in here often enough that it would not be jarring whenever she awoke.

But then Steve got a solid view of her...nothing. No bite holes. Not even a red wash of inflammation. He flicked the side of her collar open, and the only proof that anything had happened, was the drying bloodstain.

Steve was *pissed*.

He *was*. Hargrove had always carried a fuck-load of audacity with him wherever he went, but Steve had hoped he might at least respect the one rule Steve had put in place. Granted, it had been on the fly while Billy stalked him around his pool, but still. His pride and neck were on the line every time Billy fed, after all. Steve had been ready to face the annoying embarrassment of getting hard from the bite, like some kinked-out perv—but then he came in his pants. Steve had thought that had been his rock bottom, but he really should've known better. After Billy beat his ass last year, and then this whole *snacking* thing, Billy clearly had a talent for undermining any sense of self-preservation and dignity that Steve held.

But as Steve returned to the room with a soaked washcloth and towel, it bothered him how much he understood some of Billy's motivation. If he could just bite someone, and they normally heal safely without any memory of it? Easy pickings.

*Don't commiserate with the vampire, Steve*, he scolded while tucking the towel into his mother's blouse so he could soak the stain without startling her. *That asshole deserved to get his tires slashed.*

He wasn't sure why he didn't do it. Hargrove had been on his back and Steve held his baseball bat. Steve sighed as he held the stained patch in a fist with the soaked washcloth. *Why does being the bigger person make me feel like shit?*

He didn't want to linger on that too long. Making trips to the kitchen sink to refresh the cloth, he soaked and blotted his mother's blouse until even the dryer rim of blood in the fibers had faded enough to go unnoticed. He draped a blanket over her and left the door open a crack as he exhaled, "Thank you, polyester..."

His eyes alighted on the crate he'd left on the stairs.

Oh. That.

He turned the box to look through the front grill at the bleary eyes blinking at him from inside a plastic cone. Leia cooed a hoarse sound at him. Before he even meant to, he was cooing back, "I'll get you some water, hang on. Some time without the cone on a soft bed will be nice, right?"

God, his mom would be so pissed when she woke up. After he double-checked the front door locks, he carried the spayed and drugged cat up the stairs. It had been a surprise to both Steve and Robin that her mother wouldn't take the cat. That had been...an interesting moment, seeing something like pride drop out from under Robin's feet as she spoke on the hospital's phone with her mom. Right before she picked it back up and slapped a credit card on the counter while declaring, "We'll take shifts."

Steve frowned up at her while he had a hand in the crate, stroking the passed out cat's forehead. "I thought I was the one screwing corporate policy. Health code violations are next level."

"Not at Scoops. She'll stay at your place for a week and then at mine, etc."

Steve looked at the veterinary hospital phone through which Robin had gotten the news. "I thought your mom just said you can't take her?"

"My mom won't foster her, but she's out of this now."

Steve had been dangerously close to feeling a wild amount of fondness for Robin—until she got her card back from the man behind the counter. "Since I'm paying: you first, sailor."

Now he saw on his bedroom floor, easing her out of the crate. It took some tinkering, but Steve got the cone off Leia's skinny neck. He thought for sure he was strangling her at least three times, but the cat blossomed once it was off—and went straight under his bed.

"No! Damnit," he breathed as he stared at her under there. "If you lick your stitches, we're done."

He went back downstairs for the groceries he left in his car, and the litter box he remembered seeing in his garage. They'd never had a cat, but it had been there as long as he remembered. He washed the dirty cobwebs off of it in the sink and filled it with the cheapest litter from the store. He figured next to his own toilet made sense, and he laid out a bath towel under the water and food dishes next to his dresser.

Leia came right out at the sour smell of Grade-F meat and fish. Steve scoffed and sat back against his bed, raking a tired hand through his hair. "Garbage gut."

But he quickly showered and settled for the night, watching Leia explore his room, and checking on his mother once before passing out himself.

\* \* \*

The sounds of sizzling and skillet clatter woke him the next morning. Then the terror of realizing he might be late for work jerked his head up.

*Off...I'm off for two days.*

He collapsed back onto the pillow with exasperated relief. But two seconds of adrenaline made five hours of sleep wasted. He might've been tempted to try for more sleep, but...his mom was still home, and there was a cat to take care of.

Steve found the latter sound asleep under his bed, so he shut his bedroom door behind him and descended the stairs...

He came to a gradual stop, silently absorbing the melody drifting from the kitchen.

Humming.

His mother was humming. Steve could not name the last time she'd struck a tune, but he now warily peeked into the kitchen.

"Morning," she said without turning around. Steve felt so exposed he unconsciously rubbed a hand over his abdomen to make sure he

wasn't delusional about wearing a shirt and shorts.

"Jeez, you haven't done that in a while," he laughed breathily.

She smiled over her shoulder. "A mother's sensitive hearing never goes away. If you want toast, now's the time."

He stepped into the room to select his bread off the counter, but stopped when he noticed the stand mixer, which usually lived in the pantry. The glass mixing bowl already had a kind of dough inside it and a dishtowel over it. "You're baking?"

More than that, she flipped *latkes* over in a skillet before she answered, "I had a craving for brioche."

Steve evaluated the potato pancakes, the skillet of finished, scrambled eggs, the stand mixer... "Are you feeling okay?" he tried to say casually as he dropped bread slices into the toaster. "You were asleep when I got home."

She then sighed with more feeling than he had probably heard all year from her. "I slept really well. Possibly the best sleep I've had in...well, since before you were born."

Steve processed that with a curt, "Ah," before he quickly added, "That's—great. Really great. Great for me, because I get French toast for dinner with this, right?"

He gave the mixing bowl a tap so it dinged underneath his mother's scoff. Small conversation flittered between them as Steve waited on his toast, poured orange juice, and topped his latkes with salsa from the fridge. His mother didn't make coffee, and since they were apparently both off today, he didn't ask for it.

He waited until he went back to his room to sit on the bed and just... recalibrate.

It had taken him an entire day to unlock a fraction of his mother's personality.

Billy did it with one bite.

Steve slid off the bed to sink to the floor, definitely *not* rubbing his sternum or the ache in his chest on his way down. He looked under his bed, but Leia sat like a loaf of bread right by the edge, practically waiting to paw at his ankles if the slow-absorbing shot of painkiller wasn't still in her system. He offered his fingers for her to smell but didn't push further.

He planted his elbow on the crease of his knee to hold up his face. He couldn't help but think about how it was his day off from a job he disliked, and his only source of company that wanted him was a drugged up stray. That his only real summer plans were waiting for a fourteen year old kid to come back from summer camp.

Oh, how the mighty fall...except he'd never been mighty. Not really. Not when he took chemistry twice, had assholes for a posse, and his only real talents were dumb luck and holding carbonation in his stomach.

"Holy shit," he breathed as he scrubbed his hands over his face and used the bed to climb to his feet. If he was going to spiral, he'd do it in the tub with music in his ears to drown out his own thoughts, and if he was lucky, the feelings that came with them.

\* \* \*

Billy had never felt so unsatisfied.

Mrs. Harrington's blood had done the job, sure, but he'd also eliminated his first reliable source of blood. Who happened to be the one person in this shit town that—for some reason—remembered things despite Billy's venom.

He pressed his whistle into his bottom lip, fiddling with it on the supple skin while he halfway paid attention to the pool in front of him. Maybe the stress was burning through the blood faster than usual. He'd also gotten the shock of his life that Steve still had a backbone. It grew back stronger than the first time, after Billy gave it a few bruises.

Okay, maybe a sick part of him is impressed. He could wash off the humiliation, especially since it had happened late at night, with no



audience, and Harrington did not draw it out by damaging his car. Billy could get over it, because really, he was just back to square one.

Because really, he was *hungry*. He'd gotten used to taking more from Steve. Shit, it was a good thing they had: Billy's venom helped Steve sleep and Billy got as much blood as he wanted, when he wanted. Billy had been the one to fuck that up. It may have been Steve's fault all those months ago in November when Billy hit first. But this time, Steve hit first, and Billy deserved it. Steve's pushing him into the pool was child's play compared to Billy taking it out on the guy's mother.

Regardless of the score or who kept the tallies, Billy was still left with the same problem: he needed a blood source. He couldn't help but wonder how likely Steve might be to forgive him enough to offer up his neck. Then again, Robin had been an easy bite. And she *forgot*—the way his meals are supposed to...

Billy's eyes locked onto the person arriving at the pool. "Well, well..." he said under his breath.

Nancy Wheeler did not look like the type to frequent pools. Too scrawny to be much of a swimmer and way too pale to carry any sort of tan through the winter, so sunbathing was out. Billy analyzed her dress that came straight out of the 1950s. He'd never considered her any kind of expert on fashion but...this was something else.

Steve's emotional memory gushed to the forefront of Billy's attention. The...ticklish warmth the guy used to feel for Wheeler. A knot of sensations Billy could untie if he wanted; sort through each emotion and the memory attached to it. But he didn't. Both because he didn't care to—not with *that* dress involved—and because he already had a lot of Mrs. Harrington fresh in the brain.

Which...was a lot. That woman kept a lot locked down, shit. She shared the insomnia that her son struggled with. Billy knew the instant he tasted her. The quickness that his venom knocked her down as if she were made of tissue paper. It was kind of impressive, in a demented sort of way. Not Billy's venom, but how much the lady carried. Two decades' worth of stuff.

Like miscarriages.

That had knocked the wind out of Billy this morning over cereal. Max had looked at him when he choked, but had the sense not to say anything. Billy, meanwhile, went through the tremors of aged, jaded, and tired *want*. Failure. A sprinkling of guilt, but mostly Mrs. Harrington held an incredible amount of want inside her. Steve wasn't supposed to be her only baby.

Two miscarriages later, and doctors finally found something wrong.

Surgery.

No more babies.

The *last* thing Billy ever wanted to know about a stranger was how they'd had to have their uterus removed. But shit, Steve was kind of a miracle baby. A miracle baby who didn't have a clue he was supposed to be a brother. That his mother had named the siblings he lost.

It was scary as shit, knowing those names. Memories really were the biggest surprise and the biggest screw over when it came to drinking blood.

But there stood Nancy Wheeler, who actually had her two siblings locked in, whose brain was guaranteed to be full of textbooks, college applications, and whatever torch she carried for Byers.

Billy swung down from his lifeguard chair and strolled toward the tunnel entrance of the community pool. Heather was already on her way to take his place while Nancy stood by the front desk where people signed in. Billy looked her over behind his sunglasses, making a show of grabbing his cigarettes from behind the desk and leaving for a smoke break. Wheeler was so skinny, he could prick her finger with his tooth and she'd clock out.

Perfect.

She didn't have any sort of pool bag with her, either. So Billy waited. He relaxed against the side of the entrance building, out of sight when Nancy finally returned to the parking lot. She glanced around—a habit he had learned that women had. They weren't wrong to do

that, to look around parking lots and empty space for potential allies.

Potential enemies.

Billy had long since been to work, mentally coaxing lingering parents and kids into their cars or back toward the pool. Clearing the area for his chance.

He gently focused on Nancy as he stepped on his cigarette and followed. He felt the tick in her brain when she heard him behind her, but he carefully nullified it, like wiping a letter of chalk from a blackboard. She had conveniently parked behind one of the decorative hedges separating sections of the lot. Between her car, and the tall box bush, Billy wrapped an arm over her chest and bit down —

A sharp elbow in his gut made him cough the first gulp of blood he'd managed to get.

Then a heeled shoe landed over his defenseless, flip-flop wearing foot.

*What the shit? What the shit,* his mind began to swiftly retreat—

His mental control on Nancy kept her from moving, but she sure had a mouthful to say as he lifted his head enough to see an all too familiar reaction radiating through her skin from his bite. Nancy's body reacted the same as Steve's.

"I know to oos a gun! Pieceofshit..." she slurred, gradually collapsing in his hold from his venom coursing through her system.

Billy unlocked her car and placed her on the driver's seat like a doll. He opened the windows so she wouldn't bake, and intended to get the hell out of there. He couldn't know how long Nancy would sleep; Steve had slept for the night after his first bite, but Billy'd had his fill. Nancy had wasted no time shoving her bones into his guts, and he wanted to be far away when she woke up...

He paused to rip out some of the tissues from the box in the center console and wiped her neck... "Jesus. Shit..."

Did Harrington have some kind of STD that he'd given to Nancy? Or vice versa? Because what the hell was this reaction? *Satan's asshole*, Steve had called it, and he wasn't wrong.

All Billy could do was stuff a tissue under her collar like a sweating groom does to his tuxedo, and make himself scarce.

\* \* \*

Steve groaned quietly as he got out of the car outside of the post office. He'd mother asked him to get stamps while she lounged in the pool. He could hardly deny her a proper, vacation day off, so here he stood. In their Indiana summer; humidity thick enough to cut. At least the heat should be breaking within the next hour or so—

The screech of tires turned his head across the street to the Hawkins newspaper office. He certainly knew Nancy's car when he saw it. He'd never voice aloud what he thought of her driving, but she sure had a fire on her heels today. Steve was still in the middle of counting his quarters for stamps when she slammed out of the office just as quickly as she'd gone inside it.

Steve's jaw dropped, and he picked it back up. He and Nancy weren't on bad terms, and central Hawkins was like a deserted boom town since the mall opened, so he called, "Nance! Hey, Nancy!"

Her body lurched in her effort to yank her car door open as she looked at him. He heard a quiet, "Steve?" then louder, "Steve! Have you seen Jonathan?"

He jogged across the street. "No? But he's the camera guy, right? He's probably over at the mall and all that carnival...construction...holy shit."

Bigger than the sun, a garnet spot on her neck flared crimson along its edges. Panic, concern, and anger slammed into each other in Steve's brain. He pointed at his own neck, "Nancy! When did this happen?"

"I need to find Jonathan!" she all but screamed. "I got attacked at the pool! I woke up in my car! I don't know what happened! My whole

neck—chest—head hurts—”

Oh.

It occurred to him, at this moment, that Steve was the only one with working knowledge and experience with vampire bites.

“Okay. Okay,” he eased his tone to soothe. “Come over here. I’ve got cold water in my car. Come on, talk to me.”

In rapid succession, he took a blanket out of his trunk for her to sit on the pavement outside the post office, and wrapped an old gym towel around a sweating bottle. She gratefully held it against her neck while he dug in his glove box for ibuprofen. Nancy’s eyes followed this and the rattling of the bottle. “When did you become so well prepared?”

“Since I got beaten up twice. Here. It’s not much, but it’s something.”

She opened the bottle and accepted the pills. As she swallowed, Steve ventured, “Why are you looking for Jonathan? Does he carry a first aid kit with him?”

Her gulps were loud before she rasped, “Does this look like a normal mosquito bite to you?”

Steve gestured defensively and rotated to sit down beside her. “Don’t attack me. I’m just asking.”

He could hardly blame her for being high on her panic. Out of the two of them, Steve was the one who had royal meltdowns. Hers was tame in comparison.

“This is kind of hilarious, that I found you instead of him, but Jonathan’s my boyfriend. He’s the one to go to for comfort, right?”

*He was always the one you went to*, Steve thought, but kept to himself.

“And it’s not like a whole ton of people know about—about everything that happened. This thing on my neck falls into the shitty category of Upside-Down weirdness, doesn’t it?”

“Uh. Nancy.”

“And that stupid Library may have shut down but it’s not like the building got demolished. What if something’s still happening? What if something got out and I just got—”

“Nancy. Look at me.”

“What?” she exclaimed, not taking well to being interrupted.

But Steve lifted the hair covering half of his neck. His bites were faded enough to be mistaken for week-old, fading hickeys, but he still had the tooth marks in the middle of them like Nancy now sported.

Nancy’s big eyes and pouty mouth made for an open book. Empathy, apology, and shock swirled behind her features as she went slack-jawed and shook her head gently. “Steve...oh my god. Those are old—why didn’t...you haven’t said anything, have you?”

“My friend Robin, knows. Kind of has to, since she works with me.”

Nancy sat up straight suddenly, like a cold jolt moved up her spine. “Robin. Oh. That’s nice. Good. That’s good, right?”

Steve contrastingly slouched. “Relax. This doesn’t have to be weird. Robin is a friend. Tell me what you remember.”

Nancy inhaled deeply and took the time to gather her thoughts. “I went to the community pool to talk to someone about swimming lessons for Holly.”

Steve frowned. “Hasn’t your mom been going to the pool?”

That seemed to strike a nerve. Nancy huffed. “Yeah, but I’m the eldest sister. You wouldn’t understand. I’m sister and a half-mother to Holly.”

Steve nodded while he processed that. “Huh. Okay, well...the swimming lessons?”

Nancy heaved a sigh as she put her elbow on her knees and held the bottle to her neck. “I left. I know I left. I’m...eighty percent certain I

left the pool. Then I woke up in my car. I'm not sure if I dreamed being attacked or what—but *what* could have done this to my neck?"

Steve mutually sighed, "Well, you know, Billy has no finesse about anything—"

He felt her searing gaze but didn't need to meet it. There was no point hiding this from Nancy. They fought a demogorgon together. She'd pointed a gun at him. They had a bond, or whatever.

"*Billy?* Billy Hargrove?"

Steve peeked at her. "You did—you didn't know? No smell of cigarettes or whatever that cologne is he wears? He's kind of... aromatic."

She snorted briefly before exploding, "No, he was behind me! I think I remember that. Or *they* were behind me. Wait a minute."

Steve had latched onto that word. *They*. It sent a spike of fear down into his belly. Billy was one thing, but he was a threat Steve knew about. Another vampire...that was a different issue. But Nancy had said the pool. Billy worked at the pool. It had to have been Billy.

Nancy yanked his attention back with, "Steve? Steve, why is Billy Hargrove biting people?"

She lurched back again at the expression he gave her. "Come on, Nance, it's not that strange for us. He's a vampire."

Her jaw dropped further. She made a curt sound that implied she wanted to guffaw at that but his expression kept her from doing so. "A. A vampire."

Steve nodded and dramatically lifted his hair again. "I've been the meal plan up until yesterday. The better question is why the hell you and I get infections and no one else does."

Nancy waved her hand, gesturing for a pause. "Hold on. Unpack what you just said."

He did, and...is it bad that he enjoyed this? Talking to Nancy. He

didn't want her the way he used to. That was long gone; those broken pieces scattered between Tina Price's house and the Byers' yard.

But he didn't hurt anymore, either.

So he told her. About Alexandra O'Neil's party, and all of it. "I guess it's my fault he went after you."

Nancy had calmed down and glanced at him thoughtfully. "What do you mean?"

He wagged his head from side to side, admitting, "You know, you're my ex and I called off the arrangement we had. It's my fault."

"Steve, I don't think it's your fault whatever that ass head does. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Billy has a reputation even without the...vampire stuff. But that makes me think..."

Steve didn't like that tone. "No, no, go back to this not being my fault."

She lent him a smirk but continued, "It's better if we know who Billy's feeding on. To keep everyone else safe. Do you think he would agree to being exclusive?"

Large, brown eyes blinked back at her, incredulous. She quickly added, "You said it wasn't that bad! The—venom? Ew—helps you sleep? That's what you said. You could do that again."

"Are you forgetting the part about him biting my mom?" he barked. "The part where I waved a nail bat over his head? At what point has Billy Hargrove given the impression of forgiveness?"

"I think he'll forgive a whole bunch with the two of us knowing his secret."

It was Steve's turn to stare slack-jawed at her. "You know. You have the uncanny skill of nearly getting *me* killed. You want me to blackmail a vampire."

"Just Billy Hargrove."



*“Just Billy Hargrove!”*

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I have a tumblr blog just for Harringrove things, but I post updates to both! So if you're already following my main blog for notifications, you can stay put :)

[My harringrove Tumblr~](#)

[My main Tumblr~](#)

## 13. Peaches

For a town where nothing fucking happens, Billy was having an eventful twenty-four hours. Mrs. Harrington last night. Nancy Wheeler this morning. The day hadn't even finished, and now Steve goddamn Harrington strolled through the community pool entrance tunnel.

Billy didn't want to deal with it. His shift officially ended fifteen minutes ago, and he had to get to the one decent restaurant in town before it closed. So he strode into the employees-only locker rooms and fished through his locker for his clothes instead of taking the shower he wanted.

One of these days, he needed to take the initiative and get out of town for a good meal. Maybe Chicago's Little Italy. It would be a damn drive, but pasta and then a good, thirty year old drink—

"Billy?"

His movements paused. He wasn't exactly difficult to find, moving around a tin locker in a smallish room.

"Billy? You decent?"

He exhaled for what little patience this day afforded him. "What do you want, Harrington?"

Steve had the glorious timing of coming around the corner right as Billy's swimming trunks hit the tile floor. Whatever, he hadn't waited for Billy to give an answer. His head snapped up to look anywhere else, but they'd already seen each other naked in the Hawkins High locker rooms, so neither shied away.

"We need to talk about some things."

"You're the one counting panels on the ceiling."

He practically heard Steve's nostrils flare. And then, "I need to know if another one like you is in Hawkins."

Billy only wavered briefly at that before hopping into his cutoff jean shorts. He still didn't answer right away, though, inducing Steve to say, "Look, I know you bit—or *someone* bit—Nancy. You're lucky I'm the first person she ran into after she left here this morning. I thought you might be petty and bit her because of me, but considering she works at the journalism office with her boyfriend, that didn't seem the brightest idea."

Billy didn't know Wheeler worked for the newspaper. He knew Byers liked taking pictures, but that's all. Steve didn't need to know all that.

Steve shifted his weight behind him and his voice took on a more accommodating—or whining—tone. "Listen, you're...you. But you're tolerable. Another vampire biting people isn't—"

"Just me."

"What?"

Billy glanced over his shoulder at him. Then he returned to shaking out his t-shirt. "It's just me here. I bit her."

Steve made a contemplative sound like, "Huh," but just had to get mouthy. "I don't like how long it took you to answer."

"I don't give a shit what you like."

"Are you covering for someone else?"

Billy scoffed, "No. I bit her. She would've been fine, but she's like you. Bruises like a peach... Hits like a hammer, too."

He could hear the damn smirk in Steve's voice. "She knows how to use guns, too, so watch out."

Billy's head emerged through the shirt to glare at him. "She might've said something similar."

Steve smiled. Billy couldn't say if Steve had ever smiled directly at him before.

Based on how something moved in his chest, like the surprise of a

single bulb coming alight in a dark room, he'd guess Steve reserved his smiles for others.

"Did I help you bond with your ex or something?"

Steve tossed his head to move the hair off his face. "No way, Nancy and I have been over since last Halloween. But *did you* bite her to get back at me?"

He sighed, "She was available. That's all."

"And that's why you bit my mom? Because she was *available*?"

Billy closed his locker and fully faced him. "Yeah. Do you have a problem? Or are you offering yourself to be more *available* to me?"

At some point, Steve had come to hold his elbows during this discussion. Now he shrugged, loosening his arms to slide his hands into his back pockets. "Yeah. I am."

Billy tried for nonchalant. He smirked a little and sassed, "What makes you think I'm still interested?"

"Well, either you and I can have a better arrangement with, like, a schedule, rules, and shit. Or Nancy can blackmail you."

Billy's lips parted as he moved his weight to his other foot. "Your ex is ball and chaining me?"

"Considering you're biting random people without a lot of forethought other than convenience, you're making it easy."

Now was an extremely annoying time for Steve to learn how to argue.

Billy sauntered forward, nearly closing the gap between them. "Then pull your shirt open for me. Make it easy."

"No," Steve scoffed easily. "I have to drive home. Come over in the morning."

"You think you're calling the shots now?"

“Just because you’re a dick, doesn’t mean you have to be an asshole too.”

Billy should not be smiling, but he caught himself too late. Whatever his face was doing, prompted Steve to continue, “What time do you work tomorrow?”

Billy took his time shouldering his bag. “I’m off.”

“Me too. Come over whenever.”

“5am?”

Steve chuffed on his way out. “Deal’s off if you wake me up at 5am.”

\* \* \*

All things considered, that went pretty well.

Though Steve began to regret not just bringing Billy to his place once the hours dragged on and walking around the neighborhood did nothing for his brain. Wandering the humid streets probably should have been more frightening than it was, but Steve’s issues were in his dreams more than the waking world now.

It got to such a point that at 2am, he found his old bicycle and bike pump. After rehabilitating the tires and wiping off the gritty cobwebs, he found an abandoned project of his dad’s.

Steve briefly considered how Billy’s bite still lingered in his mother’s bloodstream for her to be sleeping through all of his tinkering, but he unearthed his father’s tools and untangled the Christmas lights. His dad had taken the plug off, stripped the wires and soldered them into a battery pack. It took some fresh soldering, electrical tape, and fresh batteries, but Steve got the portable string of lights working.

He duck-taped the battery pack underneath his bike seat, and wound the lights around the frame. It’s not like anyone would be driving around Hawkins this late at night, but they sure as hell wouldn’t hit him.

And it was nice. The tepid night on his skin and balmy air making his

hair flutter. He mostly kept to his neighborhood, but with the world asleep, he found himself on Main Street too. The neon signage had long since gone out for the night, apart from the places that wanted to discourage robberies.

So much for the vending machine outside the arcade, though. Steve would never admit it to Dustin, but he figured out how to get free candy bars years ago. Never mind that *KingSO07* had high scores until Steve's sophomore year. A Snickers fell into the window tray, and Steve dined on his bike seat until a sign flickered to life in the distance.

The sky had begun to bloom with dawn light: pastel blue, purple, and a burning fringe of pink by the time Steve rode a curving arc into his driveway. He trotted up the garage steps while the door groaned closed. His mother raised a brow at him while she brewed her morning coffee. "Nice time?"

"Yeah," he sighed, reaching for the bread knife in the block on the counter. "Couldn't sleep."

"Sure. Cut enough slices for a pair of sandwiches. I'll make you one before I leave."

Steve dissected the remains of the brioche loaf she'd baked yesterday and toasted them for his breakfast. The early morning turned into Steve loading up smoked salmon, cream cheese, and a fried egg on a pair for himself and his mother while she made sandwiches for later.

She rubbed between his shoulder blades and donned her leather tote onto her shoulder. "Try and sleep some. Have a good day."

"I will," he promised sincerely. "Love you."

"Love you too," she returned, already out the door.

Steve took his half-eaten food upstairs, where Leia excavated herself out from under the bed almost immediately. Steve pulled off a small strip of salmon for her. "Could you maybe not throw litter all over my bathroom? That'd be great—"

*Dingdong! Dingdong! Dingdong! Dingdong!*

He used his bed to climb to his feet. “You know, it wouldn’t be the worst thing if he was nocturnal.”

Leia slithered back under the bed and Steve moved his feet in time with the obnoxious doorbell. Billy stood on the other side, looking mighty pleased with himself. “What if my mom was still home?”

“She’s not. I drove past her.” Billy sauntered over the threshold. Then he leaned in close to Steve. “What are you eating? Fish?”

“Problem?” Steve sassed, tossing the door closed and leaving Billy to follow him up the stairs.

Billy groaned behind him but kept his complaints to himself. Until he walked into Steve’s room, and his eyes locked on the floor. “Why do you have a cat under your bed?”

Steve frowned, and even doubled over to see Leia far away from the bed’s edge. “How did you know?”

Billy didn’t care to explain to Steve how he could see auras like infrared heat signatures if he focused, or had a sturdy blood supply. Instead, he looked at the plate on the bedside table. “Lot of smells in here now.”

Steve was quiet. When Billy looked over at him, those large eyes seemed inquisitive instead of their usual...doe-like default. Either way, it was easy to tell when Steve was thinking even without feeling his aura *hum*.

“Do you smell better than people—other humans do?”

“You’ve clearly never had a pet before. Since when did you have this one?”

“Since now, *dodgy*.”

“Are we going to do this, or what?” Billy cornered. He would not be outtalked by Steve Harrington, goddamn it.

The latter exhaled and sat on the bed. “Is this what those cougars like about you?”

Billy grinned and climbed onto the bed to face the other direction. His sunbaked skin and red lifeguard shirt stood out like embers against the grid wallpaper and cool tones of Steve's room. "There's plenty to like about me."

"Mrs. Wheeler would take your head off for having shoes on the bed."

"Not like I'll ever know now, jackass. Hold your shirt out of the way."

In a bizarre form of retaliation, Steve whipped the whole thing off so it landed atop Billy's head. For a long second, Billy sat, stoically unbothered, then he inhaled while pulling it off.

Steve thought his heart might've stopped in his ribs; nestled up close to his sternum like an inmate behind bars daring to peek at Billy holding the fabric up to his nose. "What did you do all night?"

Steve swallowed. "Bike ride."

Good, his voice sounded normal. Steve had never been ashamed of sneaking smells of Nancy's hair or smelling her jacket whenever he woke up before her. He'd never been on the other side of that, though. He tried to focus on how his thighs had wobbled going up the stairs, and how he was already feeling sore from exercising all night...

Billy's hand came around to hold his nape, and pulled Steve right over to his mouth. Steve's hands fumbled to steady himself—finding both the bed and Billy's legs. His heart ducked back against his sternum when his hair follicles tingled with Billy's nose against his throat. Right under Steve's ear, Billy's breath was loud, the velvet of his voice filling Steve's brain.

"You smell like a summer night."

"It's June," he blurted, and immediately closed his eyes, as if that would erase what he just said.

Billy snorted softly against his skin. "Ready?"

Steve's eyes opened. "You're asking?"



“I’m not going to be nice to you.”

Steve huffed, “When have you *ever* been nice to me? *Hahh!*”

The bite was a shock, but a familiar one as Steve’s brain rolled under the waters of Billy’s venom hitting his bloodstream. It doesn’t take long for his dick to rise and strain in his jeans. He felt his blood lurch through his erection when Billy’s teeth retracted and he sucked, hard.

But it was the low, quiet moan in Billy’s throat that made Steve shiver and fall right over the weak, crumbling cliff edge of an orgasm.

After another moment, Billy’s tongue laved over Steve’s neck, curving a little to press along his windpipe. “You really need to get laid.”

“*Shut up,*” Steve barked, but it’s breathy next to Billy’s head and... makes Billy lift up enough to see him. One of Steve’s hands is on his thigh, the other on his back. When had he done that? No one...held onto Billy when he fed. Their hands got too weak for that. Sure, Steve was building up a tolerance, but this seemed to be distinctly a *Steve* thing. Handsy Harrington.

And he was still holding him. Billy faced the choice to ignore or admit that it was really hot how Steve clutched at him to *keep going*—

Steve inhaled deeply and it shuddered out of him as he came to, realizing that Billy was done and just watching him. “What? Is this the nice part or the mean part?”

That has Billy confused. It sounded like a challenge. Keep going or chicken.

Either something moved on Billy’s face or his lack of an answer made Steve laugh like a drunkard. “You don’t even know!”

Billy only sighed with a shake of his head as he angled for another bite. “Shut the hell up, Steve.”

But shit, Steve’s laugh melts into a wide open *moan* when his teeth sink back in, and the sound thrashes right through Billy’s chest and down down down to his groin.

Hot.

Really hot.

Steve came twice with Billy's tongue slow-fucking his open bite. When he went totally limp, Billy bodily pushed him against the pillows. Billy lingered against his slowly knitting skin, lapping up the stray drops until Steve's flesh finally let Billy's venom heal him closed.

*She's like you. Bruises like a peach.*

Billy sat up and examined the blossoming infection on Steve's neck. His pride wouldn't let him discuss how the only other vampire he'd ever known was his mother. She hadn't exactly gifted him with a festoon of knowledge, anyways.

Steve didn't need that information, plus Billy now had to consider the annoying ramifications of Nancy Wheeler knowing—

How much did she know? Billy had assumed that both she and Steve were a problem, but then why did Steve come to ask if he had bitten her? Maybe Nancy knew what had happened to her, but not that it was him? Did Steve have the sense to keep his freaking mouth shut or was he able to sidetrack her concerns?

Easy way to find out, with his blood fresh on Billy's tongue. And with three samplings of blood in as many days, Billy had kept sleep to a minimum...

He let himself recline on the other half of the bed—what little half there was to share, with two people on the other side of puberty. After a moment, he turned onto his side, facing the passed out Steve. It always took a long time, if ever, for Billy to get comfortable in someone else's space. Whenever he heard hippie Wiccan stuff about energy and cleansing a space, he wondered if half of that had come from vampires.

But Steve's space was...almost only half of him. Like his essence in here had faded despite his still very much living at home. He wasn't emotionally attached to this room anymore.

With the warm bundle of a cat underneath the mattress, and a whole lot of harmless Steve beside him, guaranteed to be unconscious for a long time, Billy closed his eyes. He let himself occupy the emptiness as his brain drifted, sinking into the reservoir where dreams and blood memories pooled.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

♦♦ only one bed in a large, empty house????

And let us never forget the way Billy Hargrove treats doorbells.

[My harringrove Tumblr~](#)

[My main Tumblr~](#)

## 14. Rewind

### Notes for the Chapter:

I have been wanting to write 🍷 this 🍷 chapter for 🍷 freaking 🍷 ages!!! Let's get this party going ~~~

Hunger moved through Steve's belly, waking him. Blinking through the fog of venom-induced sleep was a challenge, but he lay conscious enough to know that more sleep would lead to a more painful, famished awakening later.

He took his time working his eyes open and staring at the ceiling. Soft breaths beside him tilted Steve's head to the side—

*Holy shit*, coursed drunkenly through his brain at the sight of a grown man lying next to him. The same instant he recognized Billy, he bubbled with laughter at himself. *I guess it has been a while since my last sleepover.*

Steve let his head fall back onto the pillow, neck sore as hell. He was watching Billy sleep before he realized...observing how long those dark lashes were, resting on freckled cheeks. Billy's mouth was parted, the whole of him finally looking his age for once, instead of some cigarette slinging, guard dog over the pool. He looked young. And...

*Pretty.*

Steve blinked, his thoughts record scratching before he struggled to climb out of his bed. He held his head up like it would roll off his shoulders. The movement didn't disturb the sleeping vampire, so Steve lumbered downstairs for some much-needed food.

\* \* \*

Billy found the discussion with Nancy easily enough. In the way memories feel disjointed, he did not rest in Steve's mind so much as a little beside him, watching him navigate Nancy while mother-

henning her fresh bite.

The confirmation that Nancy completely *knew* what he was...did not make him happy... But there was something strange about this conversation. Strange—

*“Come on, Nance, it’s not that strange for us. He’s a vampire.”*

Billy watched Nancy’s shocked reaction, and even her immediate inclination toward anger. A flicker of Nancy’s own mind caused Billy to almost...slide in between them. Sharing the experience from both minds. Nancy *did* think Steve had a silly sense of humor.

But he wasn’t a liar.

Billy felt that knowledge like a hard and fast belief; a rigid rubber band in Nancy’s mind with barely any give to it. Nancy trusted Steve. So she had nothing left but to trust that Billy had bitten her.

And, Jesus, Steve really did spill *everything*.

*“I guess it’s my fault he went after you.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“You know, you’re my ex and I called off the arrangement we had. It’s my fault.”*

*“Steve, I don’t think it’s your fault whatever that ass head does. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Billy has a reputation even without the...vampire stuff. But that makes me think...”*

Billy didn’t like that. Even if his ‘reputation’ did him favors, too much notoriety could lead to too many people finding out the wrong information all at once...

*“It’s better if we know who Billy’s feeding on. To keep everyone else safe. Do you think he would agree to being exclusive? You said it wasn’t that bad! The—venom? Ew—helps you sleep? That’s what you said. You could do that again.”*

*“Are you forgetting the part about him biting my mom? The part where I*

*waved a nail bat over his head? At what point has Billy Hargrove given the impression of forgiveness?"*

*"I think he'll forgive a whole bunch with the two of us knowing his secret."*

Then Billy felt something...strange. Not strange—just fear. Fear in Steve. Then the latter retorted, *"You know. You have the uncanny skill of nearly getting me killed."*

Like a car lurching over a speed bump, Billy felt the swoop of fear in his stomach before the settling weight of Steve's words. The resolution of...bravery.

Brave. Steve had to be brave in order to say that to her. Why? Why did skinny Nancy Wheeler—

Flashbacks, both visual and emotional slammed into Billy's mind, and he quickly retreated. The idiot loved her. That much was annoyingly—overwhelmingly—clear...

Used to.

Steve *used to* love her. Billy felt the indifference as he drifted through Steve's mind through the rest of the afternoon. A person still in love would hurt. Would still be mourning. Steve didn't mourn. He liked Nancy and he missed being in love, but he did not miss her.

*"...uncanny skill of nearly getting me killed..."*

What the hell was that? It seemed a bit overdramatic for—

*"Like we didn't kill Barb!"*

*"STEVE!"*

As quickly as Billy had whiplashed to gazing to Nancy's drunken eyes with a red alcohol stain on her clothes, he now heard Nancy's voice cry out in his ears the same time darkness and flashing lights moved too fast for him to control. As soon as he recognized Christmas lights

---

*"Mmghh! Chill!"*

Billy's eyes opened to see Steve clutching a bowl of food to his chest. Now that Billy was awake, he smelled it: macaroni and cheese. Steve struggled to chew and swallow before he said, "Bad dream or sleep startle?"

Billy blinked, caught in the net of the dream even though he sat on the bed... He looked down at himself, half sitting up on his elbow with legs stuck mid-kick over the covers. Billy heaved a sigh and flopped onto his back. All at once, he was aware of how uncomfortable it was to have shoes on. Throwing his arm over his head, he toed them off, the clatter startling the cat out from under the bed.

"Hey!" Steve chided with a mouth full of food. He set the large bowl down to coo, "Sorry, Leia. He's a brute. I'm the idiot who brought him an extra fork."

Billy opened his eyes and lifted his head. Two forks stuck out of the bowl.

...It had nothing on blood, but he *did* like mac and cheese.

Billy rolled back onto his side and plucked the fork lacking a heat signature on the handle. Steve's choice of hoity toity white cheddar wasn't the worst thing. The tiny broccoli bits were, though. He grimaced through the texture while he eyed the young cat licking cheese sauce off of Steve's finger. "Leia, huh?"

"Yeah," Steve answered distractedly. The cat stood with her front paws on his crisscrossed legs, enraptured by the sauce on his fingertips. "Looks like she's finally recovering from that narcotics shot."

Billy navigated through the noodles and rejected vegetable bits to ask, "If she's fresh from a surgery, where's her cone?"

"I took it off. She acted like a zombie with it on, but she's a good girl. Yeah? Considering you tried to take my leg off behind the mall."

The memory itself flashed in Billy's mind, making him laugh under his breath. The difference between the mangy thing by the mall

dumpster versus the clean dumpling of a calico tabby cat, was staggering.

“I guess it is five o’clock. Come here, goblin spawn. I got your cans over here.”

Billy paused his chewing. He looked around the room until he found Steve’s clock, and damn. 5:11.

“How the hell did I sleep so long?” he wondered aloud.

Steve glanced up at him while the can popped and Leia wailed underneath his voice. “All of your shifts are in the sun. That’s probably why.”

“It’s never bothered me before,” Billy returned flatly, though it was not entirely honest.

Steve scoffed as he took the spoon he used for the cat food to his bathroom for a rinse, “Yeah, you’re like the opposite of a vampire. You’re a plant.”

Billy’s mirth took him by surprise, making him hold his fist to his mouth while he finished a mouthful. When he recovered, he looked at the new green additions to Steve’s room. “Speaking of, what prompted you to get some of those?”

Steve reappeared in the bathroom doorway. He didn’t seem...happy about the plants. Indifferent in the same sort of deflated way King Steve’s been carrying himself for the last few months. “My coworker suggested it. I like them, but this room needs a lot of work that plants can’t cover.”

Full as he was with Steve’s blood, Billy heard the memory as easily as Steve’s voice:

*“You know what you need? Plants.”*

Billy blinked slowly, seeing the memory almost like it was his own.

*“What? You’re messing with me.”*



*"All this monochromatic, soulless man-energy in here could really liven up with some green. Green's a safe color for you, right?"*

*"Robin, just say what you mean, please."*

*"I'm saying more teenagers have neon decals, pop star posters, and glow in the dark stars on their walls than you've got porn mags crammed under the mattress."*

*"I've got a secret drawer, thank you very much. Classy. Like 007."*

*"Really? You actually have a secret compartment?"*

As Steve explained it to Robin, Billy saw it, and turned his head to the bedside dresser. Steve's own muscle memory tickled in his fingers. He knew what Steve had in there: two pre-rolled marijuana joints and miscellaneous porn...

*"But what I mean is that guys are allowed to have color in their rooms. Nobody who matters is going to call you a pussy just because you acknowledge the color spectrum and put a little bit of it on your walls."*

Buckley had a point. Billy had a museum's worth of stuff on his walls in comparison to Steve. He didn't really subscribe to a color scheme; he just kept things he liked...

It occurred to Billy that everything Steve held a little closer to the heart, was hidden. This room was a lie, but in its nooks and crannies, were little truths.

*"I know that. I never thought I needed to change it. It's just a place to crash, you know?"*

*"Well that's sad as hell."*

Billy might agree, if he did not keep up his own lies.

Wading between Steve's memory and his own thoughts, Billy let himself follow Steve to the bathroom, where he began to—think about Billy. He heard his own voice in his ears, distorted from the filter of Steve's memory: *They heal fast too.*

Billy snorted aloud when Robin walked right in and Steve almost fell on his ass.

*“What are you doing?”*

*“What are you doing? Get out!”*

*“I just came to get the makeup remover. My lips chap and split if I don’t remove...properly... Oh my god.”*

This...was not ideal news. Both Wheeler and Buckley knew?

To Steve’s meager credit, he tried to cover up his neck. *“What?”*

*“What do you mean what? Your neck has holes in it!”*

*“Don’t worry about it! It’s fine! Everything’s fine!”*

*“Steve!”*

*“Billy?”*

He grunted at the sensation of his eyes being forcefully shut but a palm. *“What are you doing?”*

*“You’ve held your eyes open for five minutes.”*

Billy’s brows lifted but he did not shove Steve’s hand away. *“That’s not possible.”*

*“Well, you did, and it’s been twenty minutes. Not to mention you laughed randomly at something. I don’t know how your brain works. Maybe you should drink some water for a change.”*

Steve took his hand back and Billy wanted nothing more than to go right into his stash and light up for himself. But that would mean revealing *how his brain worked*.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, regretting leaving his cigarettes in his car. When he looked in the direction of it, he saw a warmth in the house. *“Who’s home?”*

Steve had sat back down with the cat on his lap. He tried and failed

to brush the cat's fur with a toothbrush while it gnawed on the head.  
"Mom."

"Not your dad?"

"I don't keep track of his schedule anymore."

Billy sighed as he eased onto his back, letting his eyes stay closed and recover. "That sounds endearing."

Steve ignored that in favor of laughing quietly at the cat tumbling over itself. Billy did not rush to leave. And...Steve did not make him. Only once Billy realized that they were bona fide *hanging out* did he become hyper aware about it.

"You're not nervous about your mom being here?"

"You're only saying that to be a dick."

Billy hummed a curt, "Hm," without thinking. Steve wasn't exactly wrong, but all Billy otherwise had were the sounds of the kitten and Steve cooing over her.

"Woah, easy. Get it all out now, but don't pull your stitches. Good girl. You're okay, sweetheart."

It was as equally fucking cute as it was unbearable. "I'm growing marshmallows for teeth, listening to you."

"Go home, then. You're off work, right?"

Billy did not answer immediately, but he did reply, "I wouldn't be going home."

Perhaps it was the fact that Billy still laid on his bed that made Steve simmer down, "Guess it's not just me having a spectacular summer."

Billy didn't want to think about that. How he would otherwise be on a beach right now, and long after the sun went down. Absorbing as much golden light as silver from the moon—

He stood up. "I've got less than three hours of sunlight. I'm not

spending it here, moping with you.”

“Good. I can stop hosting—could you lighten your steps? The cat’s the size of a potato.”

Billy only paused to give him and the cat in his hands an impertinent glare. But he could feel the cat’s aura of anxiety just as he could feel Steve’s discontent and his mother’s bundle of work stress and relief at being home. Radiators of information through rice paper walls.

Billy inhaled for calm and thought of the color pink. Of the sunset clouds he’d be chasing after he left this house. He could feel the cat relax as its head craned up to look dreamily at Steve.

“Billy?” Steve chirped, annoyingly *concerned* for him and his random silences.

He gripped the doorknob. “See you around, Harrington.”

Billy did manage to slip out of the house without confronting Mrs. Harrington. He didn’t feel like looking that mistake in the face, and he did want to get outside after accidentally sleeping all day. Since he had finally allowed himself to drink his fill this summer, he’d forgotten that blood did not necessarily keep him going like gasoline. Avoiding the brain fragments that his meals gave him was easy on blood and no sleep. But as much as he loathed three people knowing about him—especially under threat of blackmail—Billy could not disagree that drinking from Steve and Steve alone, at the very least, made sleep predictable. Steve wouldn’t have much else to surprise him with, so long as he dodged those silly, reoccurring sci-fi dreams.

That’s what Billy told himself.

He allowed himself the contentment of a full belly and a rested mind. He even reconsidered the logic of an evening at his house. How a *respectable* young man spending the evening in instead of who knows where could be insurance for later.

So after the sun slanted more shadows than light over Billy’s favorite haunt—one of the grassy hills just outside of town that happened to have a view of the mall—made his car rock with his weight and

drove to Cherry Lane. The irony being that only Max was home. Fine.

“Hey.”

“Hm,” he returned, passing behind the couch she sat on.

“Can you give me a ride tomorrow?”

“Only if it’s on the way to my shift in the morning.” Max sighed haughtily, not like the idea of an early morning one bit. Billy smirked. “If you don’t like it, use your allowance on a bike instead of the arcade.”

He met her glare as he shut his bedroom door, but she wasn’t angry at him. Even without his abilities, he could see the spark of thought behind her surprisingly matching blue eyes. Billy would probably gave a couple twenty dollar bills missing soon, but he wouldn’t be giving rides anymore.

He fell into his bed like a familiar nest, after turning on his stereo. Just something to fill the air and his brain. Now that he lay horizontal again, it surprised him just how damn tired he was. Blood usually made him excited, awake. Instead, he felt the syrupy tug of fatigue sliding over his brain like surf on the sand. With a heave of dwindling energy, he rolled over and shoved his window open, closing his eyes and breathing in the fragrance of summer.

Sunbaked concrete and asphalt.

Wet and cut grass.

The smell of orange light and blue sky that only summer had.

Gasoline.

Old faux wood paneling.

Billy’s brows furrowed, feeling the itch that is being in a dream, and knowing it. But...He did not sit on Steve’s shoulder. He stood... between two.

No. Three.

Billy looked at the figure next to him, recognizing Jonathan Byers and —*liking*.

Nancy, he realized. *This is Nancy*. But there was Steve too, right in front of him, gazing up at those goddamn Christmas lights webbing across the Byers' ceiling—

*Wait*. Billy's head swiveled between Steve and Nancy. They...*both* shared this nightmare? That didn't make sense, unless they saw the same movie? But why was Jonathan here? Steve knew he was there too, it wasn't just Nancy. The pair were bright puzzle pieces to this memory, and even though Jonathan was dull and dark because Billy had not fed on him, when Steve looked back at him, Billy *knew* this had to be a *memory*.

Steve and Nancy shared this memory.

But they looked different. They all looked different. It took Billy a long minute to figure out that Steve's bloody face must have been from the fight he heard about with Byers.

This didn't make sense. Billy was in the middle of something and needed to rewind...

—NANCY WHEELER IS A SLUT—Steve climbing the ladder to clean it—

*Too far*.

Steve parking in front of the Byers' house. Billy recognized it easily enough, and then faced Steve's shock at seeing Nancy open the door.

Billy figuratively stepped over to Nancy's side, and...found glimpses of things he did not want to analyze. It would take too long. A disgusting tree and a grey field? It was too spotty, anyways, implying that Nancy had experienced something terrifying, and her brain was trying to crush padding against it.

A wall. A wall of stupid, oblivious bravery. Her mind planted the wall between that tree and this night; an abstract defense to do something important. To stay strong...

She froze, staring at Jonathan's equally shocked eyes while they heard Steve knocking and talking through the door. *Why* she had answered the door after the day they'd had, Billy couldn't fathom. Just Wheeler being Wheeler. Stupider than she could admit to herself. Brave to a damn fault. If Steve wanted to apologize like the prince he tried to be, then it could have gone faster if Jonathan handled it—

Billy felt himself snap back to Steve as something recoiled inside him at seeing Nancy's injured hand. Billy could only exhale for patience. Steve and his goddamn heart. But...there was something...almost soothing in Steve's anger. Billy knew anger. Knew it intimately. But this...this was a different kind.

Billy did not have time to analyze it, because this memory moved too fast. Steve smelt gasoline and tussled with Jonathan trying to get him out of the house—

Nancy holding a gun in Steve's face.

Emotional whiplash coursed through Steve and then Billy tenfold, caught between Steve's utter confusion, fear, and Nancy's resolve. *"Steve, get out!"*

Lights.

Noise.

The chaos of both silence and the literal ceiling crumbling over their heads—

*"Nancy!"* Jonathan cried twice over, in both Nancy and Steve's mind. Billy could not keep up with the shit storm; he could only anchor himself in someone—Steve—and watch in terror as the three of them waited for a fucking yoyo to move. Even in Steve's fear, he thought about how stupid this trap was. Billy agreed. Setting a bear trap in the way of your safe room? They were just asking to get stuck in it themselves. Nice jump on Steve's part, though...

Then he was outside. Outside, fumbling with his keys and—

The memory stabilized as Steve stared at the lights going wild inside

the house. The night around him may as well have been a blurry, useless vignette, but Steve's vision almost vibrated with hyper clarity on the house as he shoved his keys back into his pocket.

If bravery and stupidity were opposite sides of the street, then Steve and Nancy owned the whole damn block. Hell, he, Jonathan, and Nancy were running the whole damn town.

But this would mean...that it's real. That *something's* real. The thing Billy first imagined standing over him, now stood over *Steve*.

*"Plant your feet!"* Billy yelled before he meant to. Christ, Steve stood on his damn toes, making Billy feel nauseated from his vibrating adrenaline and movements...

Billy dodged the swiping claws with Steve and felt the solid connection through the bat in his own hands. The fire in both Nancy and Steve's eyes as it screamed...

A *loud*, but faraway scream turned his head.

What?

They were looking at something...else. A building. A whole lot of bellowing was coming out of said building. Billy looked around him and realized that this was now a different memory. Steve's hair was longer, and Nancy's shorter. And—

*"Max?"* Billy exclaimed, looking at her and all of the runts that had been at Byers' house the night he beat Steve...to a...pulp.

Rewind.

*"Hey! Dickheads! How come the only one helping me out is this random girl?"*

Billy felt like he could have literal smoke come out of his ears. Max snuck out for this bullshit? To...retrofit a bus? With Steve Harrington and two idiots that apparently both had crushes on her, if Steve's observation was anything to go by. Billy didn't give a shit about that—frankly he found his sister's romantic intrigue on the brotherly side of vile—but then darkness fell over the car junkyard...Billy moved



through the stagnant part of the memory; just Steve playing with a lighter and listening to young teenagers rant about—

*“My stepbrother’s always been a dick. But now he’s just. Angry. All the time.”*

Max. Steve heard the words but...no notion of Billy flashed in his mind. Steve remained indifferent, or at the very least, a little bit sorry for Max. He didn’t know that Max was Billy’s stepsister yet.

*“...I do not want to be like him. Ever. I guess I’m angry too, and...I’m sorry.”*

Steve peeked at Dustin during this, knowing the kid had just lost to Lucas, but he didn’t have the heart or the privacy to tell him—

A raspy growl focused everyone in the bus. The same kind of bellow that came from that building. It was like that thing in the Byers’ house, but different. Louder, if the distance was anything to go by...

No.

It was *many*.

Billy felt like throttling Steve for leaving the bus, only able to watch him get surrounded by several...smaller monsters.

*“Demodog,”* Dustin whined, throwing Billy into a kitchen. Steve leaned against the counter, but the kids—including Max—sat at the table.

*“Demogorgon. Dogs. Demodog...It’s like a compound. A play on words—”*

*“Okay,”* Max silenced.

*This is before I got there,* Billy considered, feeling an absence of pain in Steve’s soon-to-be beaten face...

But there was a presence in the living room. Billy tried to see in there. To see the source of...pain resonating inside Steve. The pain of being alone. Of fear. Of being...sorry. Just so goddamn sorry...

A kid? Billy recognized one of the kids in the group Max liked to tag along with...

*"What's the matter with him?"*

*"Will is possessed by the Mind Flayer!"*

*"And that means you have to keep him tranquilized?"*

*"...He's a spy..."*

*"...Hive mind?..."*

Screaming. Both Nancy and Steve, everyone, recoiling at the sound of the kid's screams.

*"What's that?"*

*"Morse Code."*

*"He's in there. He's talking to us."*

The phone ringing.

Billy's eyes popped open. Feeling drunk, he sat up, slick with sweat. His brain swayed in his mind, dragging itself out of Steve and Nancy's terror over the phone ringing while his own chimed throughout the house...

He had his own on his bedside table, and he gripped it without meaning to. He acknowledged Nancy in his mind, wrenching the Byers' phone off the wall and detached himself from it, setting his own phone down sort of gently. For a long moment, he listened to the music of summer outside his window. Then he looked over his shoulder, and realized night had fallen.

\* \* \*

Max laughed into the receiver as Billy strode behind her, looking... wetter than before. Had he showered? "Where are you going?"

She didn't get a response outside of a slammed door and the loud

rumble of the Camaro outside. From the phone she heard Lucas ask, “What’s he doing now?”

She shook her head even though he couldn’t see it. “Hell if I know.”

\* \* \*

“Mom! I’m going for another bike ride,” Steve called.

“Be safe!”

“Yeah!” he responded, trotting into the garage. He found his bicycle and checked the lights he’d wound through the frame to be sure they would last. Just in case, he duck-taped a pack of batteries underneath the seat and opened the garage door—

At least he recognized the black Converse standing on the other side of the door, otherwise an unexpected visitor would have scared the shit out of him. “Jesus Christ, Billy,” he accused as the door rattled up and up, “you’re standing like a serial killer.”

Billy stood with his hands on his hips, wary eyes trained on Steve. “What the *hell* is a demodog?”

Steve felt the blood drain from his face.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter is M E S S Y lol I'm sorry it has to be that way with Billy whipping back and forth between memories. The boy is doing his best.

[My harringrove Tumblr~](#)

[My main Tumblr~](#)

## 15. Dracula

Steve's eyes bugged out of his head. "You *what?* "

Billy's rolled so hard his weight shifted backward and he had to adjust his steps. "Don't make me say it. You heard me. It's not that hard to understand."

"And when were you planning on telling me that you can *read* my thoughts?"

"Never," Billy sassed right back. "And I don't read your thoughts. I see your memories. Whatever succinct thoughts are attached to the memory, I *might* pick up."

Steve's features settled into resignation before he pointed at him. "Made you say it."

Billy paced while scrubbing his hand through his hair. "I'm going to throw your bike in the damn ditch. Explain what the hell I've been seeing, already!"

"No! How do I know you're not fucking with me? If you can see my memories, what did I want for my sixth birthday?"

Billy grimaced at him, because how the hell was he supposed to find a very specific thing from over a decade ago?

Except...the memory drifted right up through his mind, so random and clearly not Billy's own that he huffed a laugh. It must've been something Steve had really wanted in order to leave such an impression. "To sit on Prince Phillip's lap at Disney World. Aw."

Steve's features went slack as quickly as he tightened back up. "Shut up. Fine. But not here."

"The shit do you mean—?"

"Grab that bike pump. I'll put lights on the other bike so your ass doesn't get run over. I'm not talking about this here. If my mom overhears any of this, she'll get me a shrink."

Billy reluctantly rotated until he found the pump in question. He cleaned off the old bike seat of crusty cobwebs and flipped it upside down to fill the tires while he watched Steve strip some fairy lights and solder it to a battery pack. He might've been impressed, if he didn't have the sentiment to declare, "I'm so tired of seeing those damn lights."

"Yeah, well. They keep people alive," Steve declared flatly.

It took a moment for that to sink in, and then Billy jerked upright. "Should I be *concerned* about something out there?"

Steve sighed heavily, pausing as he wound the lights around the bike frame. "No, not anymore. Spin the tires to make sure the spokes don't catch on any bulbs."

With the lights on and the tires fully mobile, Billy set the bike back on its rubber and rode it into the driveway while Steve used the panel on the house to shut the garage behind them. "Come on."

"I feel like a stupid kid on this thing. What's wrong with a car?"

"It's good for you, jackass. Try to keep up."

"No, I'm picking the spot."

Steve all but growled, "Christ. Okay, control freak."

The distinct grit of bike tires on asphalt tickled Billy's ears. It had been a long time since he'd ridden a bicycle, and even then, he preferred a surfboard or a skateboard. It was a dichotomous thing, feeling so exposed to the air but also absorbing the night into his skin and clothes. Kids trying to catch fireflies hollered at their decorated bicycles, and cars honked in passing. It wasn't the worse way to spend a summer evening, he supposed.

However, being that Steve had lived here his whole life, it did not take long for him to figure out where Billy was leading them. "You know, my spot was closer."

"What was that about keeping up?" Billy barked. The laugh he got in response made Billy turn his head, finding Steve pedaling with his

hands off the handlebars so he could drink from the canteen slung across his torso.

When the cap rattled shut, he pedaled ahead of Billy. "If you're taking us to the hills, then you need to *E.T.* your way up there."

Despite himself, Billy grinned when Steve launched himself off the slanted curb to land in the grass. They pedaled hard down the slope so they had momentum up the next hill. By the time they found Billy's spot—the highest clover-covered hill—they were standing on the pedals. Steve turned his bike lights off and let himself collapse in the grass and weeds. Billy stayed on his feet, leaving his lights on and filling his lungs with air until they stopped burning. Then he kicked Steve's foot.

"You really want the whole story?"

"We're all the way out here," Billy spat.

"If you can see my memories, then why not just watch them like a movie?"

Billy exhaled and finally sat, resting his arms on his knees. "Because it's not that easy. They don't happen in chronological order. And the ones that are hard for you to bear, they're hard for me to see. Plus... between you and Wheeler, I'm getting jerked around in my own head."

Steve absorbed that and chirped a soft, "Huh," then, "But you've fed on other people before. You've got practice, right—?"

"No, I don't."

The grass rustled under Steve's head turning to look at him. Then he sat up like a kid, crisscross applesauce while picking the weeds. "So you *haven't* fed on a lot of people?"

Billy tried to purse his lips into a line, but...he'd never talked about this before, and Steve seemed to be figuring that out. "I first tried in California. It didn't go well, and landed my ass here. Afterward...I just couldn't stand it. I needed something. With turning eighteen under my belt, why not? So I tried again. Turns out, in a town where

everyone gossips, everyone knows how to keep a secret.”

Laughter bubbled out of Steve. “Yeah, they sure do, if you know the right people. Then this means you didn’t feed on two people at the same time?”

“No, I did, but the first person was already fading by the time I went to the second. I already knew I could manipulate people.”

“Manipulate how—?”

“Make them forget. Until you.”

Steve blinked contemplatively. “Why didn’t you make...whatever went wrong in California, forget?”

Billy did not answer immediately. This was not what he came here to discuss. “My dad interfered. Just drop it.”

“Then he knows,” Steve said while lounging on his side, stretching his legs out. “Well, I guess he’d have to know if he’s your dad.”

“That’s the opposite of dropping it.”

“I’m not totally stupid. I can pick up a hint. You’re not the only one with a father who defaults to asshole when times are tough.”

Billy did not want to talk about his father. In the night’s sounds that encompassed them, he expected Steve to push the topic further in that direction, only to stare vacantly when Steve asked, “So what else can you do?”

“...Excuse me?”

“Normally your venom makes people pass out and forget, but you said *manipulate*. I’m keeping track.” Steve gestured to his brain with a smile. “Come on, you get to brag about it. What can you do?”

Billy moved his tongue under his lips, sliding over his teeth while he thought about how to say it. Where to even start. He watched the golden lights around his bicycle gleam on the grass as he said, “It’s all about hunting, right? It’s like I’ve got an extra cone in my eyes to let

me see extra colors.”

“A *cone*? ”

“That’s what they’re called. The things in your eyes that let you see colors. Humans have three cones. Dogs have two. Shrimp have four, or whatever. I’m not being literal. I’m saying I can see...auras. I know who the weak links in the room are because I see their emotions. It’s like seeing and feeling temperature.”

“Isn’t that, like, a *lot*? ”

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “It’s stronger when I’ve fed, but it’s like letting your eyes go in and out of focus. I can focus that ability or let it relax.”

Steve’s jaw slowly went slack. “When you came to pick up Max last November, you could totally see those little shits behind me?”

“I could totally see the little shits sitting in the window like I was *blind*, yeah. I didn’t need any help with that... I wasn’t feeding on blood yet.”

“Oh. Then you can’t, like, see auras through walls.”

Billy chuckled a little too deeply in his chest, causing Steve to shoot back up to sitting. “Can you turn into a bat?”

“What? No.”

“You can’t shape-shift? Like Dracula?”

“No,” Billy moaned, deadpan. But then he frowned at Steve reclining back on his elbows. “What?”

Steve’s hands opened like the answer was obvious and in front of them. “What good are you if you can’t fly?”

Steve might as well have smacked him, it caught Billy so off guard. He burst out laughing, letting himself dwell in the surprise of the comment, as well as the little pinkish spark that happened in Steve’s energy. Billy’s head turned to watch Steve take his shoes and socks



off, tossing them beside his bike and feeling the soft clover beneath his feet—

“Hhg—Shit!” Steve coughed when Billy threw his body into him. Steve managed to roll under the tackle, using Billy’s momentum to throw him off if it weren’t for Billy holding onto him. Steve tried to pin his leg against Billy’s torso, but the fool seemed intent to wrestle Steve right off the hill. “Fuck—Why are you like this?”

He yelped when gravity pitched and they did tumble down the slope. Yelled names and laughter spilled out of them until they landed to a stop with Steve straddling Billy. He gasped an eager lung full of air before he looked down and realized with a silly grin that he’d come out on top. “Hey!”

Billy palmed his face, just as sharply eliciting, “*Hey! Fuck off!*”

Steve threw his hand off and dove for the hill, crawling on all fours to get back to the summit. Billy raced after him, feeling the second that Steve glanced back and raised his leg as if to kick him...

Then he set his foot back down and kept going. Billy heard his own mind whisper a reluctant—scared—word of gratitude.

They raced to the top of the hill, where Billy tackled him again. Steve was laughing now, having figured out that Billy wasn’t fighting. Just tired of talking. Tired of feeling. And out here, they could be as loud as they needed. “OW! My neck hurts!”

“Good,” Billy growled, heaving Steve over him like a whale breaching the ocean in a long flop. Like this, Billy could feel how long Steve was in comparison to Billy’s bulk. He rather liked it. He felt strong.

And to his pleasant surprise, what Steve lacked in strength, he made up for in agility. He didn’t need to plant his feet here, and whipped himself around to lock his legs around Billy, heaving himself up by his core. Billy crooned under him, “Wow—*ohff!*”

He coughed in pain as Steve slipped and kneed him right in the gut. “Sorry! Sorry, I didn’t mean that part. BILLY!”

Billy charged right to his feet, red-faced and hard of breathing as he

caught Steve on his shoulder and charged him right off the hill.

The next time they climbed to the summit, they slumped in the grass, exhausted. Steve whined again, “My neck hurts.”

“If you...healed like a normal...person,” Billy panted, “that wouldn’t be an issue.”

He swatted at Steve’s diaphragm, causing all of Steve to lurch in surprise more than pain. Billy ordered, “Start at the beginning.”

Steve had to think what the beginning even *was*, but he found it. “Uh...Will, Jonathan’s brother, went missing junior year.”

Billy listened with disgruntled scrutiny, like he was trying to understand the plot of a convoluted film franchise. He listened, though, only interrupting when he needed clarification on something. Eventually he rubbed the back of his neck, “No wonder you’re scared of Wheeler.”

Steve looked at him, eyes briefly wandering over the fairy lights giving Billy’s hair and skin a warm glow. “Huh? Oh, you mean the guns?”

He laughed, but Billy altered, “No, blaming you for Barb.”

Steve went quiet, sitting back on an elbow with one of his knees bent. “I think she blames herself more than me.”

“It’s stupid that she stayed with you for a year if she was willing to point a gun at you.”

“No offense, but I’m not taking relationship advice from the guy playing the cougar field. Especially since that’s all over anyway.”

Billy chuckled, his attention darting to a cricket hopping over the grass. He caught it in his hand and threw it at Steve. The guy blurred a sound, but relaxed once he realized what had landed on his chest. He leaned over for the cricket to fall back into the grass. “Get outta here, lil dude.”

“You’re no fun.”

"I'm not picking on things just because I'm a big man who can see feelings but not deal with them."

"Wow," Billy scoffed and dodged, "But you're the guy with a... demogorgon in his backyard."

"Not anymore," Steve returned stiffly. "Don't remind me of that."

"It's not a surprise anymore why you can't sleep."

"You haven't asked me about Max, yet."

Billy blurted another laugh. "I really can't tell if you're brave or stupid, bringing up Max to me. Just because I know something was going on that night, doesn't mean you weren't a creep."

"You know, Max is the coolest kid I've ever met. You should be nicer to her."

"I'm not taking sibling advice from the only child."

"Whatever," Steve scoffed. "The others filled me in on how Max saved my life. I'm a moron for letting you use me like your own beer tap."

Billy grimaced at him. "She didn't save you. She narcked me."

"Aw," Steve smiled venomously. "You were gonna stop? When?"

It wasn't a question. And Steve didn't wait for an answer. "I wish I'd stayed awake long enough to see it."

Billy looked elsewhere until he stretched out a leg for his cigarettes and lighter—which Steve plucked right from his lips the moment it was lit. "You piece of shit."

Steve chose to inhale instead of replying immediately. Then he smiled through pale smoke, "Be sweet to me, I'm a delicacy."

Billy snorted and snatched his cigarette back. "You're a prima donna."

“You’re a vampire who can’t fly.”

Billy sucked on merciful nicotine while his eyes slanted to the side. He cocked a brow at Steve crawling to the canteen lying between his bicycle wheels. Billy took another deep inhalation and caught Steve under his ribs. He spit water and gargled, “BILLY!”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Everybody shut up! It's their first date.

[My harringrove Tumblr~](#)

[My main Tumblr~](#)

## 16. Distracted

They rode back to Steve's with clover stuck in their hair and grass stains aplenty. By then, houses were dark and only ghost lights in shops stayed on. And it was...easy. It was easy being with Steve.

They rode through neon reflective Main Street and some backstreets before getting spit out right into Steve's neighborhood. Billy laughed as he watched Steve throw his hands into the air, lamenting about not having brought a portable radio while the wind fluttered through his hair. All things considered—after getting the full story of demented tunnels and how his *stepsister* drove his car full of screaming kids and concussed Steve like a handless banshee—it was a great night.

"I still can't believe you let Max drive my car," Billy tormented as they swung into the Harringtons' driveway.

"I was kidnapped! After *you* knocked me out. You can't even tell."

"Tell what?"

"That there's blue marker on your front bumper," Steve grinned. Billy frowned, following his pointed finger—

That swooped up to his nose. "Ow—what the hell—"

"Got you," Steve chimed and then scampered into the garage. "Easy peasy, heebie jeebie."

He clicked his heels with his hands over his head. Billy might've considered the fool cute if he didn't prioritize letting go of his bike with a push, watching it roll right into Steve's backside. "Ow!"

Billy laughed as he sauntered to his car. "Catch you around, Harrington."

"Yeah—but hey!"

Billy opened his car door and leaned against the vehicle as Steve jogged to the other side of the door. "You're not going to be an

asshole to Max, are you? Even if she drove your car, she kind of contributed to saving the world, so...”

Billy’s features went deadpan. “I’m not turning Max inside-out until she steals money for a new bike. Otherwise, she and I have an understanding.”

Steve gazed at him before shaking his head. “What does that mean?”

“It’s some sibling shit. You wouldn’t get it.”

Billy lowered himself into the Camaro, leaving Steve to close his eyes in tired annoyance.

\* \* \*

“How’s the little monster?” Robin teased over a banana split.

Steve grimaced with half his body in the ice cream case. “Good? As good as a tiny cat against the world can be.”

“Do you want me to take her this week?”

Steve pressed the trigger of his scooper and deposited the wonky sphere in the boat dish. “No, I think she’s finally settled in. I don’t want to like, mess up her recovery by making her bounce between houses.”

“But is your mom cool with it?” Robin asked, setting it on the counter for the customer. While she worked the cash register, Steve closed the ice cream case and dropped his hat on it to rake a hand through his hair.

“She doesn’t know. She’s gone all day, and I’m home before she is, so it’s whatever.”

They gave the obligated pleasantries to the customer and then Robin turned to him. “You’re allowed to say that you like her.”

She smirked a little at Steve’s hat hair as he countered, “I never said that I didn’t like her. And you’re allowed to ask to come over if you want to see her.”

“That would mean I have to spend even more time with you off work.”

“*Ew*,” they said in unison, inducing tired, bubbly laughter—

“That makes three of us.”

Robin managed to poise bored and accusatory eyes at their latest customer: Billy. Given the frigid mall air conditioning, he wore his denim jacket over his lifeguard tank top and shorts. She smirked venomously with a toss of her hair. “What do *you* want?”

Billy grinned. “You’re about as subtle as a brick. That’s fine. I *know you know*.”

“Good,” she chimed with raised brows, not missing a beat. “Then what are you doing in an ice cream shop? Don’t you have an audience to please somewhere?”

Steve physically leaned his body in between them. “Can we trim the hostility, please?”

Robin stepped back for him to take her place at the counter. “I’ll go on my break.”

“Thanks,” Steve dismissed quietly. After the *Staff* door swung shut behind her, Steve frowned a little at Billy. “What *are* you doing here?”

He set his hands on the counter, letting his hips sit low over a bent knee. “Making an appointment, I guess.”

Steve’s lips pressed into a grimace. “Don’t phrase it like that.”

Billy blinked lethargically at him. “It’s lunch time and there’s nothing to do. Sue me. Nice ascot.”

“Yeah,” Steve remarked, wiggling his fingers through the tails of the adornment he’d borrowed from Robin to cover his bites. “As if this uniform wasn’t enough already.”

Billy smiled almost sympathetically. “Put the hat on.”

“No,” he snorted. “I don’t get paid enough for harassment.”

“Neither do I, but if it pays, it pays.”

Steve’s mirth faded from his face. “If you don’t like them, why do you deal with those women?”

“I didn’t say that,” Billy dodged.

“You just—”

“Is there anything actually good here? Because normally I have my *own* selection,” he emphasized.

Steve’s eyes rolled. “Since two nameless people stole the microwave from the GAP staff room, yeah, there’s a secret menu for a limited time. I doubt that you actually want any ice cream, though.”

Billy grinned. “You’re right. When do you sail home?”

Steve sputtered through embarrassed giggles. “You’re definitely only here to harass me.”

“It’s not my fault you work in a place that comes with its own word play.”

“Well swords are against company policy, so...”

Billy grinned. “Is that a sword in your shorts or are you just happy to see me?”

Steve tried not to gape and failed. He closed his eyes so he didn’t have to look at that damn smile. “Please. Leave. There are customers behind you.”

Billy didn’t move an inch. If anything, Steve frowned at him setting a hip on the countertop. “No there aren’t.”

“How would you know? You haven’t turned around since you’ve been in here.”

“Because nobody’s coming in until I allow it. Those three by the



door? They'll move on."

Steve's mouth relaxed as his eyes moved over Billy's shoulder. Billy followed that gaze, knowing Steve's thoughts like they flashed on a television screen: *One, two, three—off they go.*

Steve shifted his weight over his feet. "This isn't a bar. There's no mirror behind me. How'd you know that?"

Billy flicked his own gaze at the closed window to the staffroom. "The same way I know Robin's picking her nose right now."

Steve's eyes brightened over a wondrous, puckered mouth as the window opened behind him. Robin all but burst through it, "What the fuck?"

"You can totally see through walls," Steve sassed.

Billy rolled his lips over a shrug. "I told you, it's not as simple as that. But nobody likes an eavesdropper."

The former continued, "So, if you're able to just...repel people like magnets, apparently, then explain how I walked in on you and Alex."

Billy's bravado faded a little, caught by surprise, but he shook his head once. "I wasn't paying attention. I got distracted—got lazy. And you move quiet."

Steve smirked at Robin in the window. "Like a ninja."

She remarked, "You know, if you're able to...this is so stupid, but. If you're able to influence someone and make them leave, then you're able to attract people to you. That accounts for the cougars at the pool."

Billy laughed breathily. "No, that's just that state of housewives in America."

Steve grimaced somewhat while Robin otherwise smiled. "But you *could* bring in customers, right? Make them tip generously, too?"

Billy's swagger officially dissipated behind Steve contrasting, "That's

a bit far into unethical territory.”

“Who was the one complaining about the dirt rates of our minimum wage?”

“What happens when they walk out of here and out of Billy’s vampy influence?”

“If he’s not biting them, they should remember, right? It’ll be like their own idea in their heads.”

Steve leaned against the back counter to say directly, “You don’t know what you’re talking about. He can’t even fly—”

He looked back just in time to see Billy walking out of Scoops Ahoy. He slanted a look at Robin. “Congratulations. You scared a vampire away.”

“That wasn’t hard,” she remarked. “But why not? He can even have a share of our tips if he’s that good. We need some sort of highlight to this job.”

Steve exhaled, “You sound like Nancy. You women are scary.”

Robin started to speak, but Steve held up a hand. “No. Please remember that I’m the blood bag here. You piss him off, I get the fangs.”

\* \* \*

Billy heard the last part. He never expected to be defended by Steve Harrington, much less feel thankful for it, but he focused on marching out of the damn mall.

*Isn’t that, like, a lot?* Steve had asked.

Yeah. It sure was. That’s why he liked working at the pool. He had a throne over all the...noise. Open sky and literal space for everyone’s energy to dissipate before it even reached him. Not like in the mall, with its lie of a glass ceiling compressing everyone together. Stuffy and stifling...

They moved out of his way, allowing an easy path through the doors. He breathed easier outside, car keys in his hand. Billy wasted no time removing his jacket to feel the sun on his shoulders, soaking into his arms.

He couldn't necessarily fault Buckley for wanting higher pay and something to be excited for. But repelling people didn't come easy; why the hell would he want to attract them? It didn't work on his mother. Then again, maybe it didn't work on other vampires, period...

And repelling didn't always work.

Or maybe...his father just knew better. Knew how to distract him—

*I got distracted.*

The Camaro rumbled to life. Billy had an afternoon shift to get to.

\* \* \*

Steve sighed heavily as he kicked his shoes off and trudged into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and just stood there, observing his options. It was too early for dinner, but their lunch break was a joke, so it was not uncommon for Steve to feast on an early dinner...

Movement outside the glass door made his heart drop before it carefully buoyed back up. The afternoon sun slanted over half the pool while the house shaded the other half. Billy floated on a pool lounge in the golden half.

Steve left the sliding door open behind him and clutched his hips as he said, "Aren't you tired of pools?"

Billy didn't open his eyes, utterly calm. "Yours is saltwater. It's nice."

"Not many people know that saltwater is an option. But the neighbors would probably sue if we made the block smell like chlorine..." He frowned at Billy's naked torso, angled just so in the sunlight. "Do you ever sunburn?"

"I get free sunblock, Harrington. Go eat."

Steve's mouth shut as he looked down at himself, glaring at his so-called *aura*, even if he couldn't see it. "This is going to be annoying. I know it."

Billy smiled with his eyes still closed. After a while, he did emerge from the pool, waltzing past Steve eating at the kitchen counter, staring at him with cheeks full of food while Billy helped himself upstairs to a shower.

While he towel-dried his hair, he crooned at the cat, "Don't you have stitches you're not supposed to pull?" when she hopped up onto the bed. She rubbed herself against his abdomen and arched her back up to his fingertips.

Steve came in and promptly tackled the cat onto the bed. She wailed against the barrage of kisses and attacked his eyebrows. "Ow, your little needle teeth. Can't wait for you to lose those. I'm taking a shower, and—are those mine?"

He stared at the familiar pajama pants while Billy checked himself at Steve's closet mirror. "Problem?"

"Wha—Asking would have been a great gesture."

"You were down stairs. And it's not like you'll be needing pants for another couple of months anyway."

Steve wavered at that, but then wondered, "Why are you wearing them?"

"Pants in the summer are a weird treat. Especially in an ice box like your house."

Steve really didn't have anything to say to that, so he gathered his own change of clothes, eager to get out of his uniform. Under the shower spray, he considered Billy correct: sometimes soft pants in the middle of summer were comforting. Like randomly wearing shorts in the winter; a weird treat to contrast the season.

Steve emerged in shorts and a t-shirt to find Leia on Billy's chest, bunny-kicking his hands. "Are her stitches okay?"

“Yeah, fine. She’s just cooped up in here all the time.”

The cat rolled off Billy’s torso when Steve made the mattress bounce. “Hey, uh. Sorry about Robin. I didn’t really expect you two to talk that openly. I haven’t told her that you can see blood memories.”

Billy’s eyes lolled in their sockets. “Don’t make me sound like a sci-fi character.”

“Do you want me to tell her?” Steve rebuked.

Billy smirked venomously. “I don’t suppose it’s relevant. So, no.”

“Whatever. I’m sorry. It was kind of uncalled for, her imposing like that.”

“I don’t want your apology. Don’t you have plants to water or something?”

“I did that before work. You’re the only plant left now.”

“Pfft,” Billy blew through his lips. He looked down to see the cat venturing to the edge of the bed, clearly eyeing the floor with a daring eye. Billy’s features pinched a little, focusing on her to coax her back toward the center of the bed. Her little body slumped toward him, falling like he’d physically pulled her. *Too strong—*

“...your mom a vampire, or—”

“Excuse me?” Billy erupted, realizing that Steve had kept talking. He reached down the center of the bed for the cat, dragging her up to rest on the pillows while he listened to Steve touch on the exact topic he never wanted to discuss.

“I said, I’ve been thinking about when I asked about another vampire in town. You said there wasn’t one. You’re Max’s stepbrother, which means unless you were turned by somebody—”

“You don’t *turn into* a vampire. Jesus.”

“That’s good for me, but that still narrows it down to your mom if it’s not your dad.”

Billy laughed mirthlessly. “You don’t get to apologize for Robin and then ask shit like that.”

“But you drink my blood, use my pool and my shower, but won’t take the apology. Okay. You want to bite me and make it easy?”

Billy glared at him, challenging right back, “Yeah. I do. You run your mouth far too much.”

Steve reclined on an elbow, making himself available. “That’s rich coming from you. I found your tell.”

Billy came up onto his own, mirroring him. “My what?”

“You only talk when you feel like hot shit. If you’re uncomfortable, you go quiet. Don’t worry, I won’t tell Robin that either.”

Billy seethed, “Stop talking,” and gripped Steve’s nape to pull him to his mouth.

Even as his teeth punctured the mostly healed side of Steve’s neck, the loon giggled bubbly at the rush of venom in his bloodstream. He slurred, “Make it easy. Happy and horny like a cooked noodle.”

Billy had never snorted while feeding, and he damn well wasn’t going to now. But he retracted his teeth and retorted, “Why are you like this?”

And then Steve just...licked his mouth. The tip of his tongue even caught on Billy’s front teeth, scraping lightly before he fell back onto his pillow. “Don’t waste me, ‘m bleedin’ here.”

Billy could only shake his head and ease back down. “I’m having a hard time following you today.”

“*Hard* time—*unnh!* ” Steve laughed drunkenly while Billy sucked on his throat...sinking down over Steve’s body when the latter put his arms around Billy. Warmth...not blood, but an emotional warmth washed through him. Billy slid a thigh between Steve’s legs before he really thought about it, and then decided not to think. Steve tasted good. Steve felt good. That’s all he wanted to think about, to experience.

Easy. He wanted it to be easy.

His own arms slid under Steve, holding him snug, anchored—

Steve sighed like...Billy would have called it *like a woman*, but...for some reason, that just didn't fit. Billy didn't have the bite—ha—in him to think of it as such right now. Steve sighed like someone relieved. Horny and thankful and...

Fingertips grazed Billy's nape, distractedly drawing little, winding curves over the junction of Billy's neck and shoulders. Petting through his damp hair. Drawing some more.

Billy's dick kicked *hard* in his pants. Swelled right up that he ached. They weren't wearing jeans today. Both pelvises were softly clad and palpable against each other. Billy lifted off of Steve, looking at his face and testing as he slid himself against him...

Steve *bloomed* with sensation that felt like hot pinks and reds and gold delight, exclaiming a wanton sound that had Billy's eyes riveted to his flushed face until Billy's eyes blurred. Then he dove back down to Steve's neck, biting anew. Steve cried out, bucking up into him and fingernails scraping his backside. He gasped, "Ow...Billy, ow..."

Billy unlatched his teeth and heard Steve's tone change back into soft and gooey lust. When Billy had lain directly between both of Steve's legs, he couldn't say, but he felt them tighten around him, spurring him on and allowing Steve his own traction. Billy's tongue prodded at the holes in Steve's neck, earning a little shiver. "*Come on*," Steve slurred, hands traveling down Billy's back. Billy could almost chuckle at Steve's hesitation.

If the guy didn't commit and squeeze his ass.

Billy exhaled into a husky growl, rutting against Steve's erection and making loud, wet suction on his throat. Steve's hands wandered between his ass and lumbar, like he didn't know where to rest, or wanted all of it. His lust and mounting orgasm spiced his blood, infused Billy even as his aura pulsed with every thrill. Not just from his groin, but parts of Steve lit up like phosphorescent algae under his skin. Like a pinball of heat, Billy felt it fly up from his groin to his

chest, brain, and back down as they thrust against each other.

Orgasms usually made Billy feel like he sat under a fireworks display. In the glow but somewhat detached. Steve's orgasm felt like a fireplace. Heat and light soaking into Billy's skin. His brain floated on the orgasm escaping through Steve's voice, making Billy's own do a little spike. Then it surged all at once, hitting him hard. One of his hands gripped the pillow under Steve's head, letting the fabric take the brunt of his strength. His head hung low over Steve's shoulder as his orgasm wrung him dry...

Like emerging from a thick fog, Billy felt one of Steve's arms around his backside. The other hand was in his hair, petting Billy while lips dragged and mouthed over Billy's ear and hairline. Billy could feel a question mark in his mind, but upon analyzing Steve's, found only blissed out fuzz. After glow vacancy. Steve was completely on autopilot and half asleep.

Sleep sounded nice. Billy let himself fall onto his side, loosely held by Steve's arms going limp—

Leia slumped down the pillows, landing on Billy's head, weirdly groggy herself. Billy let her stay there, briefly considering if maybe he'd accidentally put the cat into a similar lull as he'd put Steve. Put himself.

It made sense that Steve had questions. Billy did too. Questions he'd never had answered. Questions he sure as hell didn't want to add onto, nor deal with right now.

So. He slept.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Oh noooo, he's responding to gentleness and affection,  
oh NOOOOOO.

You best start believing in sci-fi's, Mr. Hargrove.  
You're in one.

[My harringrove Tumblr~](#)

[My main Tumblr~](#)